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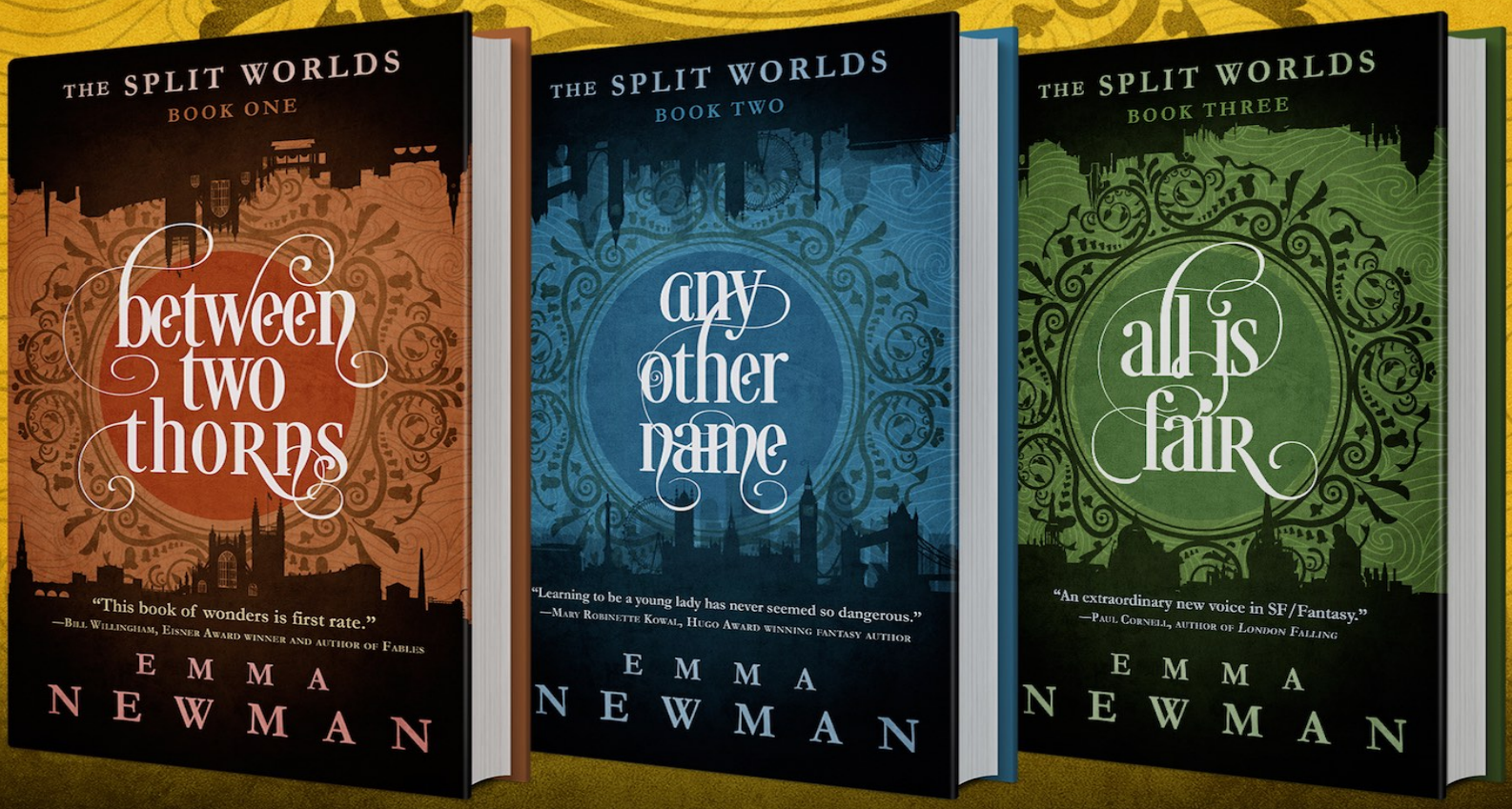
BOOKS 1–3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A Split Worlds Omnibus

BOOKS 1–3

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443 Park Avenue South, Suite 1008
New York, NY 10016
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First Diversion Books edition July 2018
ISBN: 978-1-63576-513-7

Between Two Thorns

The Split Worlds: Book One

Emma Newman

For the one who listened to a crazy idea on a summer afternoon and said yes

1

That night in Bath was the third time Sam’s beer bladder had got him into trouble. The first involved a bus, an empty bottle and a terrible underestimation of its volume. The second was at his wedding, when he’d taken an emergency piss behind the marquee, only to discover that with the stately home’s floodlights behind him, the silhouette of his relief was in plain view from the top table. Five years later he still hadn’t lived that one down.

Clothed in the warm blanket of inebriation, all Sam cared about was finding a secluded spot off the path to ease his discomfort so he could enjoy the walk home without an aching bladder.

The good and sensible residents of Bath were asleep in their beds and the street was far enough away from the centre to be free of drunken locals and lost tourists. The grand Georgian buildings he stumbled past were cast in a soft orange glow by the streetlights, the autumn night mild and still. Despite the crowds and visiting school parties, the endless requests for photo taking and the traffic, he did love the city. It was where he and Leanne had married and built a life together, even though it wasn’t the one he’d anticipated. The tourists would never know the city like he did. The old tree in Abbey Green wasn’t just a nice place to eat ice-cream near the famous bun shop, it was the place he proposed to her. Milsom Street wasn’t just a row of shops, it was the road they had marched down as student protesters back in the days before they somehow forgot how angry they were and got a mortgage.

His wife was out at yet another function with her oily boss and he wasn’t drunk enough to forget it. His friend Dave tried his best to get him slaughtered but ended up drinking himself past slurring into belligerence. Sam had poured him into a cab then decided to walk. He couldn’t drink like he did on a work night, not with a deadline the next day.

His need to relieve himself had become critically urgent by the time he reached the end of Great Pulteney Street. Heading up Sydney Place, Sam saw a familiar alleyway, one that led to the old gardener’s lodge behind the Holburne Museum. It was closed with empty grounds full of trees perfect for his needs so he lurched off the street and into the darkness. He kept a hand on the wall to steady himself, the stone cold under his fingertips. A few steps along he wondered if he’d make it to a tree, when he saw a pair of stout wooden gates open on the right.

A quick glance confirmed there was no one to see him slip into the grounds of the museum. There were trees aplenty, the solid stone wall was behind him and the building was far enough away on the other side of the driveway for him to relieve himself without fear of discovery.

“The perfect crime,” he whispered and then sighed with pleasure.

Once it was done and his trousers mostly zipped up, he turned to sneak back out the gates but a thud and hissed curse brought his attention back to the museum.

Light was spilling from a side door and Sam feared an irate security guard was about to run out. He imagined the news headlines: drunken man caught trespassing after relieving himself in museum grounds.

But then he saw a large bundle spilling over the threshold and the light was now hovering above it like a glowing dragonfly. Sam went back to the damp tree and peered out from behind it.

A man stepped over the bundle, out onto the steps. He was thin, very tall, and his limbs looked too long to be normal. His grace was reminiscent of a harvest spider's delicate movement. He was dressed in what looked like a black morning suit, something not unlike what Sam had been wearing that night behind the marquee.

Crouching, the man's long legs folded beneath him as the dragonfly whizzed about over the bundle. He lifted it and Sam realised there must be someone else still inside the museum lifting the other end.

The man took a step backwards, revealing more of the load, and Sam shivered. He'd seen enough films to recognise a body wrapped in cloth, and, from the way the man was moving, it looked heavy enough too. The bundled person wasn't moving; a dead weight.

"Oh, bollocks," Sam muttered, not wanting to witness any more. But he couldn't resist watching as the second person emerged, carrying the feet of the deceased. He was an exact copy of the first, same thin and impossibly long limbs, same clothes, same struggle to carry the body.

"Don't forget the steps, brother."

"Will you keep still!" the first hissed at the dragonfly and it hovered over the steps, casting enough light for them to navigate their way out of the museum, as if it had understood.

There was no car on the drive, and Sam could see the main gates were shut. They were turning towards the trees and he understood all too late why the side gate had been open.

If he ran for the gate now, they'd see him, so he held his breath, stopped peering around the trunk and sucked his belly in, hoping they'd be so busy worrying about the body they'd go past his tree without noticing him.

"This is rather demeaning," one of them moaned. "We hadn't anticipated–"

“Shush. Concentrate on where we’re going, the Arbiters are going to realise they’ve been distracted more quickly than we’d like.”

“Couldn’t one of the slaves have dealt with this? It’s beneath us.”

“Of course they couldn’t. Stop moaning.”

“Oh!” A tiny, high-pitched voice interrupted their bickering. They were only a few metres away; Sam worried they could hear his heart banging. He hadn’t seen a third person – had they just come out of the museum?

“What is it?” one of the men asked.

“I can smell a mundane. Very close. Euw! A man and he smells horrid.”

The voice was childlike and so quiet. Sam closed his eyes, feeling a rush of self-loathing for putting himself in the path of murderers just because he needed a piss.

The black turned to pink as a light was shone on his face. The sixth beer wanted to make a sudden reappearance. He opened his eyes, squinting, and saw the light coming from what he’d thought was a dragonfly. He’d been so very wrong.

“He’s here,” the tiny thing said.

Sam wondered if something had been dropped in that last beer. He couldn’t remember trying anything at university that could cause flashbacks, even though this felt like it was turning into one hell of a trip.

“What the arse are you?” he slurred. “Tinkerbell?”

It looked like a tiny man, but prettier than any he’d ever seen, wearing a tunic made of dusky pink petals. Its eyes were large, blue, its hair blonde and wispy. It glowed in the darkness and it was pointing at him.

He heard the body being dumped and the two men were there faster than he thought possible. They looked like identical twins, but up close they seemed less human. Their faces were long, in keeping with the rest of them,

with sharp features and thin, cruel lips. In the dim light, their eyes looked like blackened almonds.

“What are you doing here?” the one on the left asked.

“Nothing. I didn’t see anything!”

The faerie started to laugh, until it was batted away.

“No one will miss a mundane, they kill each other all the time,” the one on the right said.

Left’s hand shot at Sam’s throat, grasping it tight before he could even take a breath to beg for his life. Instinctively, Sam grasped at the wrist and when his hands closed around it the man leaped back as if he’d been electrocuted.

Sam decided to run but, before he had a chance to move, Right had caught hold of his left wrist and was inspecting his hand, his aquiline nose wrinkling in disgust.

“Oh!” the faerie squealed and covered its eyes.

“He’s protected.”

The brothers were staring at his wedding ring.

“We can’t kill him,” Left said, clutching his wrist to his chest where Sam had grabbed it. “Lord Iron would know.”

Lord Iron? Sam wondered whether he’d passed out halfway through the pee and was just slumped in the autumn leaves having the strangest dream of his life.

“We can’t enslave him, and we can’t rip his mind out,” Right said. “This is almost disastrous.”

“Almost, but he doesn’t have anything of his own,” Left said, peering into Sam’s eyes as if he were trying to see the inside back of his skull. “He’s defenceless.”

Right smiled and blew at the faerie, making it uncover its face. “Bind his memories in chains and put him under the Fool’s Charm,” he instructed, and it clapped its hands in delight.

“Make the chains strong,” Left added, holding Sam’s left hand out as far as his arm could be stretched, “and weave the Charm deep into his soul. We will not be compromised by a filthy mundane, not when there’s so much at stake.”

Right took his other arm and pulled until he was stretched between them, the tree trunk solid against his back. Even though they were thin, they were strong enough to hold him still despite his struggles.

The faerie came closer until Sam couldn’t focus on it without crossing his eyes. Its smile made the back of his neck prickle. It hovered near the end of his nose before moving round to his left ear. He couldn’t hear the wings, but he felt it brush his earlobe. It felt like a bug and he shook his head until Right pinned it to the tree.

The faerie whispered. Sam couldn’t make out the words but somehow his body could. He thrashed in their grip, sweat bursting out on his forehead, tree bark gashing the back of his head.

Spidery men…Dragonflies…Leaves…Gates…taxi…Dave…crisps…beer. Beer, beer, beer.

Black.

2

Cathy’s socks were squelching by the time she reached Cloth Fair, a narrow London street tucked beside an ancient church. “Bloody weather,” she muttered and then silently took it back. The sky was the colour of a day-old bruise and the wind was bitter but she still loved it just for being there. She never wanted to see a silver sky again.

The street was as empty as she’d hoped it would be. The weather was too foul for people to linger and everyone had gone home from work. She whispered the words of the Charm the Shopkeeper taught her as she knocked the hammer against the metal plate on the door. In moments there was the sound of a lock being turned twice and then the door opened inward, a haze in the air indicating it was leading directly into the Nether property. Cathy took one last glance down the mundane street and stepped through, feeling the gentlest tingle across her face as she crossed the threshold into the Emporium of Things in Between and Besides. She closed the door without turning around, knowing there was only silence and silver mist where there should be thunderheads.

The shop was closed to customers but the Shopkeeper was still in his usual place behind the glass counter, the only clear surface amidst the thousands of bottles, packets and magical curiosities filling the space from floor to ceiling. He wore his usual tweed suit and bowtie and not a single white hair was out of place. He was reading, but the leather-bound book was resting on the counter-top so she couldn’t see the title.

He peered at her over the top of his glasses. “You’re wet.”

“It’s raining in Mundanus. Horizontally,” Cathy replied. The Shopkeeper pursed his lips at the drops splashing onto the wooden floorboards around her. “Sorry, you know I can’t risk travelling in the Nether. The underground was all buggered up and the bus was too full, it always is when it’s chucking it down.”

“You’ve been spending far too much time in Mundanus. Your vocabulary is bordering on the nonsensical.”

“I do apologise.” She made her vowels as plummy as she could as she peeled off her raincoat. “I like the way everyone talks there. It’s easy…like wearing a T-shirt after being in a corset.”

He cleared his throat. “I wouldn’t know.” He positioned his bookmark and closed the book carefully before taking off his glasses. “It’s your last day.”

“Until the next vacation, yes. Here’s the key to the flat. I left it the way I found it.” She placed it on the counter.

“Mmm.” The Shopkeeper secreted it below the counter. “You’re determined to continue with your rebellion?”

“Yes.”

“And you haven’t been approached by anyone…unusual in Manchester?”

“No. Should I have been?”

“Not at all.” He retrieved a duster and ran it over the nearest shelf even though there wasn’t a speck on it. He had powerful Charms in place to keep it all gleaming; a dusty shop implied a lack of popularity. “But I think it’s a risky place to live, Catherine.”

She shuddered at the use of her full name. “Do you mean Mundanus in general or just Manchester in particular?”

“Both.”

“I disagree. In fact, Manchester is much nicer than London and the people are much friendlier.” They both knew it was too risky for her to live in London all the time, so she condensed the time she worked for him into long weekends in her vacation. The mundane flat he provided was nice enough and in a very unfashionable area that was perfect for her needs.

“All of this is unwise, in fact. Recklessness never did anyone any good, you know.”

“Are you regretting helping me?” When he didn’t reply she hung her coat on the stand, left her bag beside it and came closer. “It’s a bit late for that, isn’t it? You’re in just as deep as I am.”

“As I tell all of my customers, I merely supply the Charms, I leave the moral judgement to the buyer.”

“It’s not that simple and you know it. And anyway, I haven’t done anything immoral. What’s this about? Has my father been here?”

His dusting was getting more flustered. “Your brother came in yesterday.”

She went over to one of the other shelves, trying to distract herself from the surge of anxiety. It didn’t work. “Is he well?”

“He wanted a more powerful Seeker Charm.” When she froze, he added, “Not powerful enough to break the Shadow Charm I gave you, but…” He shook his head. “You didn’t really believe they’d just stop looking for you, did you? Why not seek a reconciliation?”

Cathy frowned at him. He never made suggestions like this before. Even when they made their deal he didn’t try to talk her out of her decision. It was a simple transaction: she would be his bookkeeper in return for the best Shadow Charm he could provide. Why she wanted it and what she was planning to do whilst hidden in Mundanus had never been asked. “There’s

no reasoning with my family, they won't understand." She rubbed her nose; something had been aggravating it since she came in. "What's that smell?"

He twitched. "I was testing a new product. Do you like it?"

Cathy sniffed. "It's like…cut grass. With almonds." She sniffed again. "I'm not sure it works."

"Evidently," he said, abandoning the duster and tugging his tweed jacket straight as he always did when annoyed.

The Shopkeeper plucked a purple atomiser off a nearby shelf. "I can't sell a Beautifying Mist of Atmospheric Improvement to fine clientele if it makes them behave like a starving puppy."

"The name doesn't work. It's not catchy enough."

He frowned at her. "Catch-ee?"

"Something…memorable and pithy. In Mundanus this would be called an air freshener. And it would smell nicer."

"We are not, thankfully, in Mundanus. I'll send it back to the supplier and tell them to improve the scent." He noticed Cathy leaning closer, sniffing again, and stepped away quickly. "Do you mind?"

"Sorry. Are you wearing aftershave?"

"I have no idea what that is and I have no desire to. Now, would you kindly rest your olfactory talents and instead turn your attention to the purpose of your visit?"

"Are you grumpy because it's my last day?" Cathy asked. Usually the Shopkeeper liked to gossip about the latest ridiculous request from a customer, or to show her new stock. He rarely rushed her. Quite to the contrary, she often felt as if he wanted to keep her there as long as he could. Not that he'd ever admit to it.

"I don't like disruption, you know that."

Cathy smiled, thinking about how resistant he'd been when she first started to work for him, even though the deal had been his suggestion. He knew he needed help but, after hundreds of years of working alone, it took weeks for him to even begin to explain how he ran the shop. There were still parts of the business she didn't understand and suspected she never would. "I'll be back in twelve weeks. Then I'll come back like I did the last time and get the books all straightened up again."

He put the atomiser back and looked at her as if he wanted to say something but couldn't find the best way to begin. "You can't keep me chattering all day, Catherine," he finally said, "there's work to be done."

He headed towards the office at the back of the shop and she followed, leaving the crowded shelves behind. Unlike the majority of the shops she'd become accustomed to in Mundanus, no two items for sale were the same, and there was no obvious order to their arrangement. She'd come to realise that it was far from a lack of organisation on the part of the Shopkeeper, instead it was a way to keep control whilst displaying the abundance of goods. With no labels, price stickers or signs, it meant the customer was forced to consult him before every purchase. It also deterred shoplifting as there was no way to tell what was being stolen; with curse-bearing artefacts placed next to those that gave amazing boons, it wasn't worth the risk.

At first, she'd hated having to work for him every holiday, but over the last year she'd somehow grown fond of him. It was probably something to do with his gruff delight whenever she made sense of the ledger, or his veiled compliments whenever she brought in a new system that made the shop easier to run.

It hadn't taken much to make a difference; he was utterly hopeless at administrative tasks. Thousands of wholesale purchases and sales had been recorded haphazardly in his spidery scrawl. Either he'd never had to refund

a customer in all that time or he couldn’t bring himself to record them. From what she could tell, he’d been trading for over three hundred years without any system in place and she had no idea how he’d managed to become such a success and maintain his monopoly. The Emporium was unique, the only establishment that catered for the Great Families.

“I remember the important things,” he’d said when she commented on the chaos. His memory was remarkable. He could recall where the most obscure stock was secreted and he remembered all of the prices, no matter how obscure. She had suspected he made some of them up, noting inconsistencies across the years, but he’d explained that he charged more if the customer was impolite or poorly dressed.

“This would be much easier if you let me bring my laptop, you know,” she said as she followed, the strange smell of grassy almonds tickling her nose. She missed the gentle mustiness.

“How many times have I told you? I will never let one of those machines into my shop.”

She liked to suggest it at least once every few months, but he’d never change. He’d never even seen one, she was certain, but, like most of the people caught in the web of the Great Families, he harboured a deep distrust of technology. The Shopkeeper took it to extremes, however, extending it to most things made of metal and not even permitting coins to change hands within his premises. Thankfully the prices he charged rarely had anything to do with money, but it did make the bookkeeping difficult.

He tapped the lamp on the office desk, waking the tiny sprite inside. It was only the size of a ladybird but could still throw out a terrific amount of light. Only the best for the Shopkeeper.

“I’ve put all of the latest purchases into the *ledger* as you asked,” he announced, as if he had done something remarkable. “And I’ve used my

notation system to detail the customers."

She nodded. "It won't take me long, I did most of it yesterday." She'd given up trying to deduce who bought what. If there had been any chance of her finding out, he never would have employed her. She didn't mind though. Unlike most of the people in the life she'd escaped, she had no interest in what everyone else was buying from him. His legendary confidentiality was the only reason she'd been able to approach him for help in the first place.

It had taken a month of her holiday to get things straight, but she knew she'd be leaving everything in good shape before going back to university. She wouldn't miss the uncomfortable wooden stool and the cramped conditions. It was more a glorified nook than a back office, and moving anything on the untidy desk made dust plume and irritate her nose. Why he never used the anti-dust Charms in places customers didn't see she'd never felt cheeky enough to ask.

The Shopkeeper clattered about in the shop. Usually he read as she worked, but he was unsettled today and Cathy felt sorry for him. He didn't seem to have any friends, though of course she only came when the shop was closed, to minimise the risk of discovery. The news that Tom had been back for a stronger Charm was niggling her; perhaps it had upset him too. She'd hoped her family would give up on her, but it seemed they weren't ready to give up the search yet. Poor Tom. They probably had him running all over the place casting Seeker Charms before fleeing from the Arbiters. That it was affecting him was the one thing she felt guilty about. He was the only one she missed.

"Have you finished?" The Shopkeeper lurked in the doorway.

"Nearly."

She'd already assigned a numerical value to the prices of the sold items, making it possible to calculate the profit; all that was left was totalling the column, which she did as quickly as she could. He didn't return to the shop and she looked back up at him. He was staring at her with such sadness that the anxiety bubbled up again.

"You're very good at putting things in order."

It was the first open compliment he'd ever given.

"Thank you."

"I…I will miss you, Catherine."

"It's only a few weeks," she said again, mustering a smile.

The Shopkeeper drifted away from the doorway to potter about in the shop again.

"All done," she said less than five minutes later, tucking the stool back under the desk. "I'll see you in December."

The Shopkeeper fiddled with the hem of his jacket. "Catherine…would you be kind enough to go to the stockroom for me?"

It was certainly a day of firsts. He only ever let her in the stockroom when he was with her, and that was still rare. It only reinforced how out of sorts he was.

"What do you need?"

"Nothing for me…you'll see when you go in there."

He didn't say it like it was a surprise present, more like he'd found a giant spider in there and couldn't bear to get rid of it. Then she remembered she was in the Nether, not Mundanus, and one of the few advantages it had was a lack of insect life.

"Please?" he added.

"All right," she agreed, worried her father might be putting pressure on him. Surely he'd know the only way she could stay hidden for so long

would be with the Shopkeeper’s help?

She resolved to go and look in the stockroom and then have it out with him over a cup of tea. They needed each other too much now for her father to ruin it all, and she needed to remind him of that fact, especially before leaving for three months. It would be long enough for him to forget how useful she was.

Leaving the Shopkeeper lurking in the dusty nook, Cathy pushed the heavy wooden door open with her backside and went in before its weighted hinges could push her back out again. She reached for the hammer-cord to strike the large globe hanging from the ceiling and wake the sprite within.

But the large room, crowded with shelves and boxes, was already lit. A beat later she smelt a gentle floral fragrance and then she saw Lord Poppy leaning on an elegant black cane and smiling broadly.

Feeling like all of the blood in her body had dropped into her toes, Cathy scrabbled for the door handle, instinctively wanting to bolt out of the room again. She stopped when he shook his head. No act could be more futile than trying to flee a Lord of the Fae Court.

3

A black-haired faerie was perched on Lord Poppy's shoulder, wearing a dress of blousy poppy petals, the red striking against the black of his frock coat. It was scowling at Cathy as if she'd personally offended it. Cathy realised a look of abject horror was not an appropriate nor a polite greeting for the patron of her family.

She dropped into a low curtsy, breathless with panic. She'd never seen Lord Poppy in person, but her father had, and he'd drummed a healthy fear of the Fae into her at an early age. She struggled to remember the etiquette she'd been taught, but using the correct form of address was hardly going to change the fact that she'd run away from the family, disgraced the Rhoeas-Papaver line, and most probably infuriated Lord Poppy to such a degree that he was there to enslave or curse her. Or both.

"Catherine Rhoeas-Papaver," he said slowly, his voice silken. "What an extraordinary delight to find you at last."

She trembled, keeping her head bowed, not sure what to make of the statement.

"Do stand up so I can see you, my dear, one does prefer to speak to a face rather than a crown of hair."

"It's a very dull brown," the faerie commented as Cathy straightened up. "And such a plain face. I'm very disappointed. She isn't worth–"

"Hush, or I shall send you back to Exilium," Lord Poppy said and the faerie pressed its lips together. "Now…"

He walked towards her, the cane striking the floor with every other step. His supernatural grace made her feel clumsy. His skin was flawless, his long black hair beautiful and his lips as red as the poppy petals. His eyes were pools of black, no iris or white discernible, and as quick as she saw them she looked away, chilled.

“I’ve been looking for you,” he said as she shivered. “But you’ve been hidden away in Mundanus, in the dark city.”

She stayed silent, not trusting her voice.

“My sources inform me that three and half years have passed in Mundanus since you first piqued my interest.” He stopped barely a metre away, well within her personal space. Not that one of them would appreciate such a human concept. “I simply cannot understand how you’ve survived so long all by yourself. You have none of your Mother about you, even after all the effort to breed her beauty into the line, no presence, nothing remarkable whatsoever.”

Cathy could barely think as her panic reached its crescendo and then an incredible sense of calm washed through her, as if her body had used up all the adrenalin it had. If she didn’t remember the hours of training she’d tried to bury along with most of her other childhood memories, this conversation could be the end of her, or of freedom. There was little to distinguish between the two.

“She survived because of the Shadow Charm, my Lord,” said the faerie.

Either they could detect it, or they’d got the information out of the Shopkeeper. The former was more likely. If that was the case, Cathy thought, then they would see the curse too, and if there was one thing she had to do, it was convince them she knew nothing about it.

“Ah, perhaps that’s the problem, let’s get rid of that first.”

Thumb and forefinger poised like pincers, he reached towards her shoulder but stopped just above her clothing. He pinched the air and slowly drew his hand back. She could see nothing between his fingers, but noticed the shadow cast by the stockroom's sprite changing. It looked like a blanket was being pulled off her, one invisible to the eye, but visible in shadow. When it broke contact with her body, it faded to nothing.

"Oh. You're still dull. The Shadow Charm hid her from her family," he said to the faerie, "but it didn't help her to navigate Mundanus…it's such an exciting mystery. My dear," he focused back on Cathy, "you are a tight bud with so many hidden petals yet to unfold."

He scooped up her hand with a fluid movement. His was cool and dry, and she was aware of the clamminess of her own, thinking he wanted to kiss it as many of the men in the Great Families still did. But instead he turned her palm towards the ceiling and bent towards it. An inhumanly long tongue flicked out from between his lips and he licked the tender skin of her wrist.

It felt like a feather, leaving no saliva, just a faint tingling and a wave of nausea.

"Mmmm. No trace of interference as I'd feared and no contact with the Arbiters, that's good. She has potential, but far from realised." He was speaking to the faerie again, as if Cathy were simply an exhibit in a petting zoo. "There's little more to her than what we see here. But the curse is interesting."

That drew the faerie close.

Lord Poppy was examining Cathy's face now, searching for a reaction.

"Curse?" she asked, hoping that only innocence would be seen. It was a tiny thread of a lie amongst a tapestry of deception.

He smiled, his thumb now stroking the inside of her wrist. “So you have been good, after all.”

“What curse? I want to see it!” the faerie said, but Lord Poppy swatted it away.

“I’ll tell you later.” It tumbled in the disturbed air before righting itself with a look of indignation. “Now…” Lord Poppy let go of Cathy’s hand and she folded her arms. He took a step back, twisting his cane thoughtfully. “There’s something I want to know. When a girl as plain, inelegant and quite frankly graceless as you has the chance to ask for beauty, poise or even just good taste in clothes, why in the Split Worlds would she not?”

So this was the reason this nightmare was weaving itself around her. He knew about her coming-of-age ceremony.

She was the middle child of one of the most prominent Papaver families in Fae-touched society, the Rhoeas-Papavers. Her family had many traditions, most of which she’d strained against and resented as much as the next child, but one in particular she’d managed to turn to her advantage. At the age of eighteen, all children had the right to make a request of the head of the Papaver families. When she was brought in front of the Patroon she’d asked to go to university instead of something shallow, as she’d been coached. Of course it had reached the ears of their Fae patron. No women in Fae-touched society ever went to university and few of the young men did either. So many of their parents, born in a different age, regarded further education as a sure means of ruining a young man. Cathy saw it as a sure way to freedom. They couldn’t deny her the request and even though they tried their best to make it as difficult as possible she still got to university several months later.

“Is that the reason for your interest, my Lord? An unorthodox request?” Her voice was a little high, but at least she was able to speak.

“It’s more than unorthodox, it’s positively scandalous. It was sufficient to catch my eye, yes. But it’s also the fact you ran away and have hitherto eluded your family with great success. Your tactics even challenged me, and there are not many who have been able to do that, my dear.”

“But you did find me.” She wondered what boon the Shopkeeper had received for betraying her, and his air-freshener experiment took on new meaning. He’d been trying to mask the scent of the Fae Lord who’d presumably walked through the shop just before she arrived.

“So I did. But, sly one, you didn’t answer my question.”

“I wanted to go to university because I wanted to learn.”

He wrinkled his nose, as if she’d just belched rather than told the truth. It was important to sprinkle some in amongst the lies.

“Learn what?”

“Everything I could.”

“But why?”

She had to think about that. “Because I had to know the truth about Mundanus.”

He frowned. “Why learn the truth about a place you were never destined to be part of? You must have planned to run away, even when you curtsied in front of your Patroon and accepted his gift.”

Her body found a new reserve of adrenalin, but Cathy forced herself to think carefully. She had to gamble. “Not when I made the request to the Patroon, my Lord, but later, yes, I did plan to run away. I had to, otherwise I would have failed.”

“So something happened that made you want to stay in Mundanus, even though it would age you? Even though it would disgrace your family and you’d live a cursed life?”

“Yes,” she said, throat dry. She couldn’t reveal everything, she’d never tell anyone the real reason she’d fled her family. But she had to give him a sliver to be believable. “I fell in love with Mundanus. I didn’t want to go back and live in the Nether like everyone in the Great Families. I couldn’t bear to leave it. So I ran away and hid from my family so they couldn’t stop me living there.”

Eyebrows high, he sucked in a breath and the hand that had caught hers fluttered over his chest. “Oh! Oh, darling child, I understand. I know what agony it is to fall in love with something we can never have. And what deserves our love and attention more than Mundanus? Poor, empty world, denied our gifts and beneficence for so long!” He clasped her hand again, this time pressing it over his heart, but she felt no beat through the silk shirt. “Now I understand what a delicious creature of passion you are. It was buried so far beneath an inconsequential face and forgettable body that I almost missed it!”

Cathy wondered if this was what it was like to meet someone who was truly insane. Someone so mad that speaking to them demonstrated how the world they lived in was so very different to everyone else’s. She couldn’t decide whether delighting the insane was good or bad.

“I’m so glad you understand, Lord Poppy.” She managed a smile.

“As am I! I arrived with a heavy heart, convinced that I was going to have to turn your tongue into a tethered wasp and then enslave you for eternity for having been so disloyal to your family.” He paused as the colour sank away from her lips. “But now I don’t have to, because I understand that it was love that drove you, and how can I deny love? And it really is such a relief, as it would have been so inconvenient – everything has been arranged for so long, I was struggling to imagine how I would recover.”

Cathy wanted to take her hand back, wanted to run out of the room and disappear, wanted to huddle in the corner of her student digs wrapped in a blanket and cry over a cup of tea. But he was still pressing her palm against the cool silk and showed no sign of letting go. Then she processed what he'd just said.

"Inconvenient, my Lord?"

"Yes, if you'd been unable to return to Aquae Sulis."

It had been a long time since she'd heard that name, and she hadn't missed it. Hers was one of the most powerful families in Aquae Sulis, the Nether reflection of the city of mundane Bath, both places she never wanted to see again. Whilst the mundane city was beautiful and vibrant, full of greenery and the excitements of modern life in the normal world, such as electricity and films, and technology designed to make life easier and more entertaining, its Nether reflection was not. Only a few roads and buildings had been reflected; she had grown up in Great Pulteney Street, the long avenue of reflected Georgian houses owned by her family, and of course, the anchor properties in Mundanus were protected by their clever network of legal expertise and their stronghold on the mundane Corporation of Bath. Now she'd lived in Mundanus – what she had come to think of as the real world – as an independent woman, she couldn't bear the thought of returning to that suffocating existence. "But…but I don't want to go back there. I can't!"

The smile fell from his face. "My poor love-struck one. Of course you're going to go back. As soon as we are finished here you'll return to your family, you'll obey your father and you'll live in the Nether like all of the privileged, serving your patron."

She forced herself to keep still, though the urge to shake her head and scream was almost unbearable. "But…they'll be angry with me," she

croaked.

“Undoubtedly. But it doesn’t change the fact that you’re needed there. Everything has been planned for such a long time that your wishes are quite irrelevant in the matter.”

He sounded like her father. Her yearning to make just one decision for herself was always called irrelevant. She forced herself to focus on questions and answers, rather than emotions. “Why am I needed, Lord Poppy? What use could I possibly be? You said yourself that I’m plain and–”

“Your father didn’t tell you? Well, it’s for him to do so. You’ll find out when you get home. But we haven’t concluded our business. Now I know you’re genuinely interesting and passionate, and most worthy of further attention, I’ve decided to bestow upon you three wishes.”

The conversation that she thought couldn’t get any worse suddenly did. Not the three wishes trap. That was only one step up from the wasp tongue.

“I don’t deserve your generosity, Lord Poppy,” she said, without thinking.

“You’d rather be punished?”

“No!” she managed to catch the retort before it became a squeal. “I’m sure…your decision is the very best for me.”

He pressed her palm against his shirt. She was sure there would be a damp hand-print left behind when he finally let her go. “Good. I will be watching what you choose with great interest, Catherine Rhoeas-Papaver, because I am certain that one who asks for such an outrageous wish at her coming-of-age ceremony could dream up something truly spectacular with three to play with.”

The faerie started to giggle. It sounded like a mouse being ripped apart by a cat.

“Now, three wishes are no fun at all if there are no rules. So this is the first.” Lord Poppy released her hand so he could accompany his words with an excited flourish. “You must impress me.”

She was about to clarify whether he meant with every single wish, but she stopped herself. She might need that as a loophole later on.

“The second rule,” Lord Poppy continued, evidently enjoying himself, “is that you cannot use a wish to leave Society. There is no denying who you are, my dear, and you are a Rhoeas-Papaver, one of my most cherished family lines. You have had your love affair with Mundanus, it’s time for it to end. But I’ll let you into a secret,” he whispered. “Love affairs are always at their best when illicit and should always be ended abruptly. It heightens the pleasure and keeps the dreaded boredom at bay.”

He was talking about her freedom like it was a holiday fling with a barman but she kept silent, not at all certain that she could speak without getting herself into more trouble or bursting into tears.

“There should be a third rule,” he muttered, glancing at the faerie. “It’s prettier that way. Three wishes, three rules.”

“I have an idea!” It pirouetted in delight. “The wishes have to be made before the grand ball opening the season in Aquae Sulis.”

“Exquisite!” Lord Poppy blew a kiss to the faerie, rustling the petals of its dress. The tiny creature’s wings fluttered so much they left a trail of faint sparkles. “Then you can begin the season as a fabulous success. Or as a faint shadow of yourself. Oh, I didn’t mention the penalty, did I?”

Tears or vomiting, Cathy wasn’t sure which now. He’d removed the Shadow Charm but instead of delivering her to the family, Lord Poppy was toying with her. He knew as well as she did that it was inevitable they would find her without magical protection and there was no way the Shopkeeper would dare sell her anything useful now one of the Fae lords

had personally intervened. She didn’t need a penalty to feel absolutely screwed.

“Should you fail to impress me by the first ball of the season, I shall reach into your soul and pluck out that bright source of your initiative. Then you can spend the rest of your life doing as you are told, perfectly incapable of forming a desire or opinion of your own.” He waited a beat, but she remained in horrified silence. “I think that’s fitting.” He glanced at the faerie who nodded with glee.

4

Max slid the lockpick back into the leather case, tucked that into his inside pocket and pushed the door open. One last check up and down the corridor and there was no one in sight. He stepped inside.

The air inside the studio flat was as stale as he'd anticipated, an unpleasant odour leaking from the fridge in the tiny corner kitchen. The place was very small with huge sash windows letting in light and noise from the London street below. Up here, the traffic was a constant background roar, punctuated by the odd siren and beeping car horn. He could see the roof of the building opposite, and noted no windows or balconies overlooked the flat.

He swept his eyes over the mess as he quietly closed the door behind him. Takeaway cartons were piled on the tiny table in the corner and the sofa bed had been left unfolded with sheets and pillows rumpled on top of it. Clothes were strewn all over the floor and the rickety canvas wardrobe was full of empty wire coat hangers. A couple of drawers were open, but it didn't look as if the place had been turned over. There were too many things still in place that a burglar would have snatched: a jewellery box, a laptop, a small plastic tub of loose change and a few notes.

Even though he was fairly certain what the results would be, Max took the Sniffer out of his pocket, wound it up and set it down on the kitchenette worktop. The squat brass container ticked as its spring slowly wound down, at first looking like an octagonal musical box on stout legs. The eight segments forming its top telescoped open and a tiny horn emerged, not

unlike that of a miniature gramophone. The ticking was then masked by a gentle whirring as the device sucked in the air from the room and blew it out of a vent in its underside.

All Charms used by the criminals in the so-called Great Families left a residue in the air, tiny amounts of the fragrance associated with the Fae who originally created the Charm. It was too little to detect with a human nose, and dogs couldn't be trusted, so the Sniffer was used to extract the trace amounts from the air and analyse the strength of the Charm used. Even derived Charms, created by the criminal families themselves, still had the original scents, and thankfully none of them knew the Arbiters had figured out how to trace their handiwork. No perfumes, nor any of the bizarre air-fresheners that seemed to be more popular in Mundanus each time he came in, interfered with the sensitivity of the device, but it was just a question of time before the Fae-touched families found another way to cover their tracks.

As it did its work, Max picked his way across the room, navigating past skirts and dresses, glancing at the stack of well-thumbed fashion magazines by the bed. Not a book in sight. It looked as if she'd been choosing what to wear; most of the garments were in piles around the long mirror hanging on the wall opposite the bed. He didn't bother to look in it himself. He knew what he was wearing and how ugly his face was. He'd been living with it for years.

He glanced inside the corner of the room partitioned off for a tiny bathroom. Every surface was covered with bottles and make-up. Taped to the mirror over the sink was a picture of a brunette with smoky eyes. Perhaps she'd been copying the make-up; speckles of rouge covered the sink and brushes were piled up behind the taps.

He knew the brunette in the picture wasn't Miss Brooks because she was the fourth blonde to disappear from London's St Pancras ward in the last month. He wanted to confirm his theory as soon as he could, so he went over to the coffee table on the other side of the sofa bed, seeing a notepad with something scrawled on it. He hoped that Miss Brooks liked to write things down rather than tapping them straight into those infernal mobile phones.

He nodded as he read the scrawl. "2 pm!!! Photo shoot – casual and glam – contracts – passport!!!!" He could picture her taking the call, scribbling notes as she held in the excited scream until she called her best friend to give her the news.

It all led back to the talent agency; the theory was confirmed. A tiny *ping* from the Sniffer drew him back. The horn retreated as the pointer on the side spun to…white. Good, no trace of Fae magic.

Once it was closed again, he dropped the Sniffer into his pocket. He had just enough time to send his findings back to the Chapter and make the rendezvous with Montgomery. If he could help the London Arbiter crack the case he could be back in Bath for dinner.

The windows were large enough to climb out of and he'd seen the narrow walkway outside from the street below. Leaving his trilby on the bed, he forced one of the windows up, admitting the city's roar into the flat. He stepped outside and sent a pair of pigeons up into the sky, cooing in alarm. The walkway was little more than a ledge with an ornate stone safety rail. Being incapable of fear in that moment was a boon.

The clear autumn day was a bonus; in the rain the lead roofing would have been even more treacherous. He edged his way to the corner where he'd seen the angel. London architects liked the idea of heavenly figures watching the streets and he could see why. London was loud, fast and

crowded, even compared to his native Bath on a summer Saturday. Yet again he questioned the sense of helping Montgomery with a case outside his own territory.

The angel was twice his size, classical beauty and marble toga both covered in pigeon droppings. A grand lady with a bad job, she was holding up an equally filthy cornice. If he stretched, he'd be able to reach her.

He fumbled under his coat and shirt and brought the chain up over his head, his neck feeling naked without the thick, heavy links. It was a suitably ugly thing, engraved with formulae and carrying the Wessex Sorcerer's seal, still warm from resting against his chest.

Climbing onto the folds of the angel's dress, he caught hold of one of her arms and swung round to drop the chain over her head. After a few pokes and nudges, it dropped past her nose and fell with a dull chink around her neck. By the time he'd clambered back down onto the walkway her stone eyes were blinking, and once his coat was straightened and buttoned back up again her head twisted round to look at him.

He took a deep breath, preparing himself for the rush of connection and then rested a hand on her arm to keep contact. "Personal diary entry," he said, and the angel nodded. "I have confirmed my suspicion regarding the talent agency's involvement after searching the studio flat of a Miss Clare Brooks, the fourth missing person on the list."

He paused to give the statue a chance to repeat his report back to the Chapter.

"I was right about that damn talent agency." Max's soul's voice was far too low and gravelly to suit the angel's face. "I've found evidence connecting it to the fourth missing person on the list, Miss Clare Brooks, after searching her flat. I'm seriously concerned that something is very wrong in the Kingdom of Essex."

Max blinked at the angel. Was that how he really felt? He cleared his throat. “Montgomery has failed to make contact at the prearranged location. If it happens again I’ll have to assume the individual or individuals involved have learnt of his suspicion.”

“And I’m worried that the rat Montgomery called me in to find is on to him.” The angel’s previously serene face was now distorted by a deep frown.

“Maybe he’s lying low, or…”

“He might be dead!” the angel interrupted. “This is getting serious and it’s not my territory and I don’t know what I’ll do if this gets any worse.”

“All right, all right,” he said to the angel, “let’s stick to the facts.”

“This is a personal entry,” it replied peevishly. “It’s so rare I get a chance to express myself, I have to make the most of it.”

“I’m not going to stand here and argue. I’m going to stake out the agency. It’s been a week since Miss Brooks went missing and I know I’m close. I can’t trust anyone in London, so I’ll stick with it until Montgomery shows up.”

The angel’s report was closer, though still embellished with “until Montgomery shows up dead or apologetic” tacked onto the end. When it was done, he climbed higher up the sculpture to retrieve the chain, ready for the familiar lurching sensation when contact with his soul was severed.

He’d lost count of the times he’d reported back to the Chapter from Mundanus, but every single time he broke contact it brought back the memory of the day he qualified. That was the last time he’d felt excitement, when he heard he’d passed all the tests and showed enough promise to work in the field as an Arbiter. He was thirteen, and, an hour after they’d told him, they’d dislocated his soul and put the chain around his neck, too tight then to take off.

He knew he’d screamed so much he was hoarse by the time the links were closed, but he knew it only intellectually, like a memory of a scene in a play he’d once watched.

With each successful year in the field under his mentor, a link was added until he was trusted to manage the connection himself and act independently. He had no idea where exactly in the cloister his soul was kept. Nor did he have any idea how it was stored, how the reports he sent back were recorded or how the Chapter Master was informed. But he didn’t need to know. He just got on with the job and did his best to ignore how his soul leaked emotion into his reports.

The dislocation was ninety years ago. If he’d spent all that time in Mundanus he’d be a frail old man now, if not dead. He’d have got married, had children, grandchildren, maybe even great-grandchildren. Sometimes he looked at the people, the ones the Fae-touched so disparagingly called “mundanes”, and wondered what it was like to be them, if only to try and understand and predict what the criminals would be interested in next. But he had no regrets when he observed them. That was impossible.

Chain back around his neck, window closed, flat swept for any trace of his break-in, and he was on his way to Judd Street. He kept an eye out for statues that could make valid connection points in case of emergency. In Bath he knew every single statue, gargoyle and grotesque in a five-mile radius of the city centre. His knowledge of London was insufficient for this case.

Case? That made it sound official, and it was far from that. He wondered where Montgomery was. It was rare for an Arbiter to ask for help, but to ask someone from a different Chapter? That was unheard of. For Montgomery to ask meant it was serious. That, and the fact they’d collaborated on a tough case in the Fifties, was what made him agree. That

had only been an exchange of information, however, not trips to each other's territories without official permission. It had prevented some of Lady Rose's puppets from getting a foothold in Bath and he had found Montgomery to be reliable and thorough. Max wondered why Montgomery had missed the latest rendezvous.

Speculation was futile. Max had no means of contacting him outside the prearranged meetings. They didn't use mobile phones, the Chapter couldn't guarantee their security yet, and being in different Chapters meant they couldn't coordinate as easily as he would with a fellow Wessex Arbiter.

Instead, he turned his mind to the evidence. One innocent could be lost to Exilium owing to poor luck, but to lose four in as many weeks? Montgomery was right; there had to be a crooked Arbiter in the pay of the parasites for something so blatant to happen in such a small geographical area. If Max's suspicions were correct the talent agency operating out of 191 Judd Street was a front organisation for the London Fae-touched. They were probably using it as a means of drawing blonde men and women who fit a profile to a location where they could be kidnapped. Why hadn't the local Arbiters spotted the pattern? Perhaps the more pertinent question was: why were they ignoring it?

Max couldn't understand how corruption of that magnitude could even be possible. A dislocated soul protected them not just from Fae magic but also from temptation, and the greed that fuelled corruption. As far as he knew, no Arbiter had ever been compromised; that was one of the many reasons why the Fae and their puppets were so terrified of them.

He found a café a few doors down. It took him a moment to adjust to the new prices, then he ordered a coffee and settled down at one of the outside tables with a newspaper. He wanted to watch the comings and goings at number 191 whilst waiting for Montgomery. London was

becoming more continental every year; he couldn't remember this street café culture from the last time he'd been there. But a lot had changed since the Fifties.

The disappearances were on a seven-day cycle, and Miss Brooks had disappeared exactly one week before. It was quarter to two in the afternoon, a good time to watch as all of the previous appointments had been for 2pm.

He didn't have to wait long. A woman with honey-blonde hair and extraordinarily long legs was tottering towards the agency's door. He quickly fished out his glasses. He'd almost forgotten about them; it was the first time they'd been tested in the field, and they were not part of his usual repertoire.

Through the glasses, she faded to the same grey as everything around her. She hadn't been charmed, and, interestingly, the agency frontage and threshold hadn't been glamoured either. It looked as if it was still a normal mundane office with no anchor for a Nether property. That was good. If they wanted to kidnap her, they'd have to take her somewhere else. He put the glasses away. Wearing them too long made him feel sick, and if anyone inspected them closely they'd see the modifications.

There was a bounce to her step and a smile that suggested she'd had the same phone call as the previous victims. All he had to do was wait.

It was unlikely they'd take her in broad daylight. They'd wait until dusk, first taking her to another location, probably a bar, before posting her through to Exilium. By then he should have passed on his findings to Montgomery. If Montgomery didn't show, Max was on dodgy ground by not having a local contact, but he hadn't had time to resolve that. He would follow them to the temporary location then call in to his Chapter Master if Montgomery didn't show up in the next half hour.

He was onto his second coffee when footsteps approaching his chair made him twist round. It wasn't Montgomery, but he suspected the man was another Arbiter; there was a total lack of emotion on his face and a slight bulge beneath his clothing where the soul chain would rest. Max didn't recognise him and the stranger didn't fit the description he'd been given of the suspected rat. He was dressed in a light jacket and jeans, much less formal than the suit and raincoat Max wore in Mundanus.

"Maximilian, of the Bath Chapter, Kingdom of Wessex?"

"Yes?"

"Good afternoon. I'm Faulkner, London Camden Chapter, Kingdom of Essex."

He pulled the top of his jacket down just enough to reveal the chain and the Essex seal. Max nodded. "Thank you."

"You're a long way from home," Faulkner said, sitting opposite him. "Waiting for Montgomery?"

Max nodded, uncertain how to play this. Faulkner had every right to tell him to leave, and to report his trespass to his Chapter if he felt Max was overstepping the mark. Which he had been, for the last seventy-two hours.

"He's late," he said.

"He's in custody," Faulkner replied, raising a hand to call the waiter. "Something's gone horribly wrong with him; he's been causing all kinds of problems lately and now we think he's been kidnapping people and trying to pin it on a colleague."

It was a pathetic attempt at a lie. Montgomery was as solid as Portland Stone. Max had heard that the really old Arbiters could get a little frayed around the edges but then they retired to the cloister to train the new recruits. Being closer to their soul again usually cleared up any problems. Montgomery was too young for it to be an issue anyway.

“Did he tell you I’d be here?”

Faulkner ordered tea and then nodded after the waiter left. “After he admitted he’d been struggling. It’s been tough in London lately; the Rosas are feuding again. He got caught in the crossfire one too many times. Smoke?”

Max shook his head. “Is my being here a problem?”

Faulkner drew in a lungful of smoke and let it drift from his nostrils. “Not if you leave on the next train and keep this under your hat.”

Max fingered the brim of his trilby, flicked a look down the street at the agency. The blonde was still in there. “Is this your beat?”

“Yes. Did Montgomery tell you there was a problem with the St Pancras Ward?” Max didn’t reply, choosing to wait to hear what Faulkner had to say. “There isn’t a problem any more. I’ve been assigned to clean up his mess. My ward borders St Pancras. There’s no need for you to stay.”

Max weighed up his choices. It didn’t take long; there were only two: stay and make a fuss, or pretend to leave and watch. The former would cross a line and push Faulkner into reporting him. He’d be forcibly ejected from the city and achieve nothing. The latter would risk the blonde; he’d be too far away to intervene, but his being thrown out of London wasn’t going to help her either.

He stood, resolving to gather more information. The paperwork involved in a dispute with another Chapter, especially one in a different Kingdom, wasn’t going to do anyone any good. He put on his hat and offered his hand to Faulkner who shook it.

“I hope everything gets sorted out with Montgomery,” Max said, for the sake of good manners.

“Have a safe journey home, Maximilian.” Faulkner attempted a smile but it always looked ugly on an Arbiter’s face.

5

Max headed towards the nearest tube station to make Faulkner believe he really was leaving. Whilst Max didn't buy the brush-off, he did appreciate its delicacy. Faulkner had every right to throw the book at him and frogmarch him onto the first train out of Paddington. Even corrupted, the London Arbiters were still polite.

There was an outside chance Montgomery had lost his way as Faulkner had described, but if that were the case it made no sense to call a Wessex Arbiter from the Bath Chapter to investigate; Montgomery would try to hide it rather than invite attention. That blonde was still in danger. Max needed to find somewhere to watch the agency, and now Faulkner, but also a place where he could report back quickly, should something kick off. If he was to expose corruption in an institution flawless in its loyalty and integrity for almost a thousand years, he'd need damn good evidence.

He looked up and down the Euston Road, uncertain where to go and mindful that Faulkner might have another watching him. If some London Arbiter had been sniffing around in Bath Max would have done the same. So he headed towards a nearby local map attached to a lamppost, playing the part of a Wessex man in a foreign land, as he considered his options.

He needed two things: somewhere high with a clear view of Judd Street, and a contact host to report back to the Cloister. Even a grotesque would work, if a sculptured angel or gargoyle couldn't be found. He looked across the road at the St Pancras Renaissance, the refurbished gothic hotel outside King's Cross, letting his eyes roam over the building. It played into the

disoriented tourist act, being an impressive landmark. The move paid off; up high on the clock tower he could see four gargoyles, and he'd be high enough to watch the Judd Street agency.

He made for King's Cross St Pancras station, played a standard double-back trick at the underground station and crept out of one of the quieter exits to approach the hotel. He went towards the doors, keeping his hands in his pockets and mouth shut until he was inside. Removing his hat and moving with the purpose and confidence of a guest past the reception desk, he was up the stairs in less than a minute and hunting a way up into the clock tower.

Ten minutes later he was climbing out of a roof maintenance hatch over a hundred feet above St Pancras station. He'd stuffed his hat into his coat pocket, knowing the wind would take it, so high, and hoped the innocents of London would continue their usual behaviour of never looking up.

He climbed steadily, fearlessly, until he reached a ledge from which he could reach one of the gargoyles. When he got back to the cloister after this, he planned to raise the issue of contact in hostile territory. He'd never appreciated how inconvenient it was to find a contact host until he'd found himself in an unfamiliar city. But he knew what the response would be. Why would you need another way to make contact when you shouldn't be in another Chapter's city anyway?

The gargoyle was solid, ugly and recently sandblasted. It stretched out at least two metres from the wall, as if it had been turned to stone leaping from the building. It took a couple of minutes to climb on and straddle its back near where it jutted out of the clock tower. Max inched himself towards its head, carefully slid his chain onto the stone creature's neck and braced himself.

“Oh, bloody hell, this is high up.” The gargoyle’s expression twisted into one of terror. “You better hold on tight.”

“I am,” Max muttered, getting his bearings and identifying Judd Street. He had a direct line of sight to the agency door, and hoped the blonde was still in there. “This is a report to the Chapter Master, his ears only.”

“Understood,” the gargoyle replied.

As he made his report, Max fiddled with one of the attachments he’d been given by the Sorcerer to improve the magnification of the experimental glasses. By the time he’d given the details and the gargoyle had added its own emotional commentary, his backside was numb and his ears were hurting from the cold wind.

As he waited for feedback and further instructions, the blonde emerged from the agency. She walked a few steps away, then burst into tears. He could see she was still clean. Perhaps she hadn’t been what they were looking for, and she was one lucky girl.

Faulkner was still at the café, drinking tea and watching the blonde too. So was the waiter; she was exactly the kind of person the Fae parasites would want. The glasses were giving him a headache and he didn’t want to stay up there much longer, but he had to see if she was safe. He lifted the frame to rub his eyes before resuming his vigil.

The discomfort was forgotten when he saw a man come down the street and notice the distressed woman. As he headed towards her, Max leaned forwards, studying the line of the man’s nose. He resembled someone he’d dealt with before…someone from the Rosa family line.

He was one of them, one of the Fae-touched, and he was homing in on the blonde.

Max checked on Faulkner who was watching them too. He sat still as the parasite spoke to her, making her look up in surprise, mascara dragged

down her cheeks by the tears. Then, without even checking who was in the street, without looking the least bit nervous, the Fae-touched began to weave a Charm.

Through the glasses the Rosa looked brighter and more colourful. It looked as if the colours were bleeding out where his hand touched her shoulder, her dress becoming green again, the honey returning to her hair.

“Why isn’t he doing anything?” the gargoyle yelled with Max’s fury.

Flicking a glance at Faulkner, Max watched him sip tea as the Rosa worked a Fae Charm – in broad daylight on a public street in Mundanus! – less than ten metres away.

Even though he didn’t have the glasses, Faulkner’s training would be enough for him to know a crime was in progress. The way the Rosa would be murmuring, keeping physical contact, the way the innocent’s pupils would be dilating far too much and her body language changing, it would be obvious!

But that wasn’t all of it. The fact that the Rosa didn’t even check, didn’t care if he was seen, was proof enough that something was rotten in London. In fact, he was close enough to spot Faulkner was an Arbiter; they had just as much of an instinct for identifying their enemy as the Arbiters had for identifying them. Dislocation from one’s soul took its toll on them over the years; they were renowned for their ugliness and lack of expression. Usually a Fae-touched would leave the area as soon as they spotted one, finding Arbiters unpleasant to be around. The Fae fled them, terrified by humans without strings to pull.

The blonde was calm and pliant, allowing the stranger to slip an arm around her waist and steer her down the street, past the Arbiter who was pouring himself a second cup from the small teapot.

“That slimy, rotten piece of filth, I’d like to shove that teapot up Faulkner’s–”

“Shush,” Max hissed at the gargoyle.

He was at the top of a clock tower, unable to intervene, as he knew he would be. But now he was uncertain they’d take her to an intermediate location. Brazenly charming an innocent in the street didn’t suggest he’d feel the need for caution in slipping her away to Exilium.

The blonde was already lost, he realised. Charmed into compliance and with no Arbiter intervention, she’d be in the clutches of Lady Rose before the day was out. She was condemned to being a plaything until the foul creature became bored, and then she’d be a slave for eternity, trapped on the wrong side of the split worlds.

If there was any good to come out of this, it was getting the evidence to prevent any more being taken. “Tell the Chapter Master there’s an emergency,” he said, shuffling himself further along the back of the gargoyle towards its head.

He’d only made a deep connection once before, when his mentor had been there and protected him from outside interference. For the second time that day, the absence of fear was advantageous.

Max reached down, leaning forwards until his belly was resting on the gargoyle’s back, stretching his arms around its head until he could cup his hands over its stone eyes. “See what I see,” he said, consciously opening himself more to the connection with his soul.

He felt cold and his feet were going numb as his mind struggled to distinguish between him and the stone. Simultaneously, he had the feeling of witnessing the crime unfold as the blonde was steered towards the Euston Road, and also looking through his eyes as if they were binoculars, another presence watching from a step removed. Even though Max had no

idea how he could feel it, he knew the Chapter Master was seeing the same as he did. Max focused on getting as much detail as he could.

He looked back at Faulkner, taking tea as if it were a Sunday afternoon in a world without the Fae-touched. He then focused back on the blonde, wondering where she'd be sent through.

The Fae's puppets could access Exilium from the Nether, pockets of reality created between Mundanus and the Fae's prison. For a moment he wondered if she was going to be taken into the Nether property anchored to the very hotel he was perched upon, but they crossed Euston Road and carried on, passing the station on their right, heading away from the busiest roads.

He craned his neck, waiting for a response from the Chapter Master. Even now he would be consulting the Sorcerer; there'd never been an incident like this in the history of the Bath Chapter.

It was getting harder to see them. Max struggled to make his legs cooperate as he tried to shift his position and keep them in sight.

Then the gargoyle moved.

He grabbed hold of it with his arms and legs as its body swung in the direction he wanted to go. He'd only seen eyes, mouths and, at a push, the head move on statues he'd used for a connection, never this much.

He quickly relocated the blonde and her kidnapper, heading towards an old church. But then a movement at the edge of his vision pulled his attention from the crime in progress.

Another Arbiter was balanced on the hotel roof, slightly below, about ten metres away. He fit the description Montgomery had given him: black hair, large nose, sallow skin and predictably unpleasant to look at.

The gun he was pointing at Max was even uglier.

“Have things got so bad here?” Max asked, knowing that the Chapter Master would be acting now if he wasn’t already. He’d be contacting the Essex Sorcerer and demanding aid or entry to the city directly, using the Nether. Whether it would be in time to help him was another matter.

“Only for you,” the man replied, and fired.

It was dark by the time Cathy got back to her flat in Manchester, hungry and exhausted by a train journey dominated by paranoia. After Lord Poppy’s dismissal she left the shop without even looking at the Shopkeeper and went straight into Mundanus, seeking anonymity in its crowds and reassurance in its normality. The storm had passed and the pavements glistened as she trudged to the underground station, still shivering in her damp clothes. There was no protection from her family now, it was just a matter of time before they hunted her down. She couldn’t bear the thought of dealing with that unhappy reunion at the same time as Lord Poppy’s challenge.

He’d called Manchester the “dark city” and implied her being there had made it harder for him to find her. It made it worth the risk to go home first. She needed to be somewhere that would make it hard for him to interfere; it was notoriously difficult to navigate through a challenge set by a Fae Lord without screwing up horribly at some point. She didn’t want that to happen within a ten-mile radius of polite society. She held onto the tissue-paper hope that going back to Manchester would also make it harder for her family to locate her with the Seeker Charm recently purchased at the Emporium.

She locked and bolted the door, feeling unsafe for the first time since she’d moved in, dumped her bag and allowed herself a moment of self-pity

before shuffling into the kitchen to put the kettle on. Noodles and tea first, plans and panicking second. Breaking up with Josh…last.

Her bottom lip wobbled. “Stop it,” she whispered to herself. If she started to cry, she’d never stop and there wasn’t time for falling apart. If growing up in the Rhoeas-Papaver Family had taught her anything, it was that letting emotion get the better of one was the swiftest path to failure.

She was due to have lunch with Josh the next day but would her family find her before then? She pulled her mobile from her pocket but realised she didn’t know what to say to him. She abandoned the phone and filled the kettle instead. Dealing with the shakes from being too hungry and stressed and tea-deprived would be more constructive. She raised an eyebrow at the wartime poster on her fridge: Keep Calm and Carry On.

Teabag in the cup and she already felt marginally better. Just the ritual of tea-making was starting to tell a deep part of her brain that somehow it would be all right. She poured in the water, started swirling the bag, when a rattling at her door made her drop the spoon and hurry into the hallway.

The entire door was shaking, making old paint fly from the hinges. The chain jangled, the handle twitched and Cathy backed away nervously.

There was a loud pop, sounding like a giant soap bubble had just met its end on the other side of the door, and then a gilded letterbox appeared in the centre of the wood. The door finally became still.

“A bloody Letterboxer!” Cathy said, trembling. She’d imagined her wrath-filled father on the other side of the door, when it had been just a simple Charm. As she watched, the little flap in its centre flipped open and a letter shot through, followed by another and then one every second until a small pile rested on the doormat. The letterbox shimmered out of existence with a more gentle pop.

Those letters had probably been sent over a year ago when her family realised she'd run away. Now that Lord Poppy had removed the Shadow Charm, the Letterboxer could complete its task of delivering the letters when the addressee was at home. It was a bold move to use the Charm for someone known to be in Mundanus; if the Letterboxer had been witnessed by an Arbiter there would have been serious repercussions. Her mother had been desperate, and desperate mothers never wrote nice letters.

6

Sam picked at the scab on the back of his head whilst Dave aimed his dart at the board.

“Fiver I get a bullseye,” he said, pausing to scratch under his beer gut before repositioning his stance.

“You’re on,” Sam replied as he pulled a crumb of dried blood through his hair to inspect it. “That policeman made me feel like a complete dick.”

“What do you expect?” Dave threw the dart and hit the treble twenty. He could swear as well as he could drink beer.

“I expected him to tell me if my wallet had been found, not take the piss out of me.”

He inspected another scabby chunk as Dave pulled the darts out of the board. The office was quiet; the rest of his colleagues, including his boss, were away at a conference. He’d spent all morning trying to get a script to run on the Linux box as Dave had practised the art of doing nothing productive in the most disruptive way possible.

“I just can’t believe you thought you’d been mugged.”

“I’ve got bruises as well as this cut on the back of my head, you know.”

Dave snorted. “You’d be amazed at what you can forget. Once I woke up one morning with a burned hand and a half-eaten bacon sandwich next to me and not a scooby about how either happened. You’re just hoping that you were mugged. Then you don’t have to admit to Leanne that you lost your wallet under the influence. Now double or quits I get a bullseye in two darts.”

Two darts later and Sam was a tenner better off. Dave swore, unhooked the dartboard from the wall and put the whiteboard back in its place. Darts removed and board slid down the side of his desk, he flopped into his chair and insulted Sam over Twitter.

There was a knock on the door as Sam was chuckling and thinking up a retort. “You expecting a visitor?” Sam asked as he went over and opened it, but Dave shook his head.

“Does a Mr Samuel Westonville work here?”

Dave’s chair creaked as he swivelled to see who it was.

Sam didn’t recognise him. The man was in his early fifties and his face was reminiscent of a bulldog; too much skin and not enough places for it to cling to. It hung in bags under his eyes and folds around his jawline, like it had been slowly sliding off over the years. He was dressed in a cheap suit that looked about thirty years old and his tie was Eighties-thin. “Is this about my wallet?”

“Yes,” he replied. “I’d like to speak to you in private.”

Sam was disturbed by the immediate dislike he’d taken to the man. It was usually Leanne who decided what she thought about someone before they opened their mouth.

The only private space was the corner of the room partitioned off for his boss’s office, and that was locked. “There’s a kitchen at the end of the corridor,” Sam suggested, and when the man nodded Sam closed the door behind him and led the way.

The company he worked for had an office in a cheap converted warehouse subsidised by the council. The kitchen was shared by all the offices on their floor, but thanks to its grotty state it was rarely used for anything more than hurried kettle-filling and reluctant washing up.

“Are you from the police?” Sam asked as they walked.

“I understand you lost your wallet two nights ago,” the man replied. “At first you thought you’d been mugged?”

“Well,” Sam pushed the kitchen door open, “my wife thought that. I’ve got a cut on the back of my head and a few bruises, but as the copper at the station pointed out, they’re probably just from making my way home ‘under the influence’ if you know what I mean.”

The man followed him in, glanced at the stained formica worktop and ageing microwave and stood next to the cheap table and chairs in the centre of the room. “Have you retraced your steps?”

Sam shrugged. “I went back to the pub I think we were at earlier in the evening.”

“You think? You sound uncertain.”

The man’s voice was flat. At first Sam had thought he was bored, then depressed, but now he was facing him as he spoke there wasn’t any emotional expression at all. “Sorry, I didn’t get your name.”

“You can call me Jim.”

“And you’re with the p–”

Jim collapsed. For a moment, Sam just stood there. There hadn’t been any sign he was going to faint, no comment about feeling ill or even a loss of colour. The way he fell was like someone had simply switched him off; he was in an untidy heap with his legs crumpled beneath him, and his head had struck the carpet tiles with a loud thud.

“Shit.” Sam crouched next to him, shook his shoulder. “Jim?”

He was far too still. Sam thought of all the times he’d seen people collapse in films, how the ones finding the body checked their pulse. He fumbled with the man’s wrist and couldn’t find one. With growing desperation he pressed the side of his neck but still couldn’t find a pulse.

He ran back to the office and picked up the phone.

“What’s wrong?” Dave asked.

“That bloke,” Sam panted, dialling 999. “He just dropped dead in the kitchen.”

Max dreamt that a woman was looking down at him as he lay on a cloud. Sometimes she turned into a man. Both wore blue and he wondered if they had something to do with the sky.

The man changed back into a woman with blonde hair but not the one he was looking for. This one was older and plumper and writing something down on a clipboard.

“Oh, you’re awake. How are you feeling?”

He was slowly becoming aware of an intense pain in his right leg and hip, his shoulder, then it flooded his entire body.

“In pain,” he said.

“You’re in hospital,” she said. “And you’re a very lucky man.”

“Do lucky men get shot?”

She chuckled and came to his bedside, pressing something into his hand. “This controls your morphine. When the pain is too much just press the button. You can’t overdose, don’t worry.”

“I’m not worried,” he replied, trying to lift his head to look down at his body. The blanket didn’t look right.

“I’ll tell the doctor you’ve woken up. And the police want to speak to you when you’re up to it.”

He nodded and she left. The room was small, the walls yellow, strange equipment was positioned near his bed and a black box he suspected was a television was bolted high up in a corner on the opposite side of the room. He stared up at the grey tiles on the ceiling.

Something felt distinctly wrong with his body and he was struggling to just hold onto the button she'd given him.

There was a window to his left that was open a crack. He could hear the city, birds, aircraft roaring overheard. There was also a scraping noise he couldn't explain, but no matter how much he wanted to get up and investigate, his body wouldn't cooperate.

He pressed the button, the pain eased and it felt as if he was floating. He dozed.

The door clicking shut woke him and another woman was looking at the clipboard. She wore a white coat, had long black hair tied back and her skin was a deep brown. She looked tired.

"How are you feeling?" she asked, glancing up at him.

"Something's wrong," he said. "This button is helping with the pain."

"Good." She moved nearer to his head, looking at monitors. "You've been badly hurt, Mr…"

He frowned. This wasn't right. He was in Mundanus! Why wasn't he at the cloister? Why hadn't the clean-up team dealt with all this? All he could remember was the gun's mouth and the wind nipping at his ears as he realised he was about to be shot by another Arbiter. He wasn't even sure what there was to clean up apart from himself.

"Do you remember your name?"

He had to be careful, so he shook his head.

She made a note on the clipboard. "You didn't have any identification on you, no missing persons have been reported who fit your description. I'm afraid we don't know your name either."

"How about John for now?"

"All right. The police want to speak to you for obvious reasons. I don't need to know why you were shot on a roof, I just get to put you back

together again.”

He nodded. “I understand.”

“Well, I get the impression you’d like me to just tell it to you straight, is that right?”

He nodded again, pressed the button.

“The bullet grazed your left shoulder. You’re very lucky they were a poor shot.”

Arbiters were never poor shots. He filed that away.

“Unsurprisingly you fell. The trees below helped a little but you still fell a very long way. You came in yesterday afternoon and we’ve had to operate. Your right tibia and fibula were broken in two places. The bones have been aligned and set with plates and screws.” She paused, clearly looking for some sort of reaction. There was none. He could hear that scraping sound outside again. She glanced at one of the monitors and carried on. “Your hip was dislocated too, that’s been corrected. There’s lots of bruising and you had a bad knock on the head, but considering the fall I think you were incredibly lucky.”

“What are the plates and screws made of?”

“Titanium. It’s very strong and doesn’t–”

“Will the titanium be taken out again when the leg is healed?”

“We’ll discuss that with the orthopaedic surgeon when he does his follow-up, but I imagine the plates will stay in place for at least eighteen months. Sometimes it’s more risky to take out than leave in, but the options will be discussed with you thoroughly.”

Mundanus seemed to be advancing more quickly as the years went by. Did the Sorcerers know about titanium being used like this? Had they come to an agreement with the Elemental Court? He was finding it hard to keep focused. “How long will I be in here?”

“At least another two weeks. The surgery went well, the gunshot wound has been stitched up and shouldn’t be problematic, but we need to make sure your recovery stays on track and that there’s no infection.”

“How long until I can walk?”

“You mustn’t put any weight on your leg for at least six weeks, but you’ll be taught how to use crutches. You may be able to walk with a cane in about two months, if there are no complications and if you follow the advice and physiotherapist’s instructions.”

He was making her uneasy. He was used to that. Normally he wouldn’t have such a long conversation with an innocent, as it always unnerved them to speak to someone like him.

“I’m just taking it all in,” he said to alleviate her discomfort, but it didn’t work. It didn’t bother him, but the more unnerved she was, the less likely she was to be helpful in any way outside her normal role. He might need her help if the police were going to be a problem.

“I’ll check on you during my round tomorrow. The police will be in later. There’s a button on the wall if you need anything. I’m sure the nurse will check on you soon too.”

She left without a smile or further words of reassurance. He was used to that as well; they tended to be cold when there was nothing back from him.

So the Arbiter with the gun missed. He felt his neck although he already knew the chain wasn’t there. Was it still on that gargoyle at the clock tower? Or was it in the hands of the London Chapter as evidence of interference? For all he knew, the fallout from that afternoon could still be playing out. Something was wrong; he shouldn’t have been brought to a hospital in Mundanus, and presumably he was still in London. Why hadn’t the London Arbiters come for him here?

He couldn’t believe how tired he felt. Just lying there, pressing a little button and trying to fathom out what had happened, was exhausting. He lay his head on the pillow, simply unable to find any answers in his current state.

As he drifted off, the scraping outside the window got louder. A clunk from the window as it was opened brought him back from the edge of sleep.

An ugly stone face peered inside. It was the gargoyle from the clock tower, and Max’s soul chain was still around its neck. For a moment, he considered that a good thing. Then he realised he wasn’t in contact with the stone, and it seemed to be moving independently. He wondered if the morphine was making him hallucinate. As far as he knew, movement only occurred in deep connection when physical contact was maintained.

He remained silent as the gargoyle, seeing a room empty of medical staff, pushed the window further open and climbed inside. The legs, which had been fused together to form its attachment to the clock tower, had split and become functional. It looked like a long, lean stone panther with prominent ribs and a demonic face. A very worried demonic face.

It clunked over to the bed, jumped up on the metal frame and settled into a natural perching position, looming over Max’s legs. Its weight made the bed shudder. “Well, this is a bloody disaster!”

“It’s definitely unusual,” Max replied.

“I’m not talking about me, I’m talking about that!” It had the voice of a man who smoked fifty a day and gargled with gravel. A clawed finger pointed at the broken leg beneath the domed blanket. “We’re corrupted now. It’s a sodding catastrophe!”

“One thing at a time.” Max recognised his soul’s taste for drama. “What happened to the Arbiter? Why did he miss?”

“Because of me.” The gargoyle grinned. Max was certain that most innocents would find its face even more frightening when he did that. “I wasn’t going to let that rotten Arbiter finish us off. I whipped us round out of his line of fire, still caught your shoulder though.”

“What happened to him?”

“Ahh, well, I played it cool at first; I wanted to see what he did. I think getting hurt when we were linked was too much for you. You passed out on my back and he must’ve thought you were dead. I knew the Chapter Master was on the case, I could feel it, so I watched. I was worried he’d come over and throw you off, but when you didn’t move the rat that shot you connected using one of the other gargoyles on the tower. Swift as you like, he told his Chapter Master you’d sprung them and it was bad.”

Max scratched his new beard. “So it’s as high as the London Chapter Master? You sure it was him?”

“Who else would he connect with?”

“I don’t know. Then what happened?”

“That’s where it got a bit hairy.” Its huge stone brow furrowed. “He came to knock you off and get our chain. So I had to knock him off first.”

“He’s dead?”

“I reckon. He landed on the hard bit at the bottom. And you fell, when I was dealing with him. Sorry about that. I couldn’t catch you. It took a while to realise I could still move after we broke contact. He didn’t land on the trees like you did. There was a *splut*.” Its muzzle wrinkled at the memory. “Not nice. Then there was screaming and blue lights and I expected the Chapter Master to send someone through pretty sharpish, but then…” Its stone shoulders heaved a shrug. “Then it all went…wrong.”

“Wrong?”

“It felt very bad…the bit of us that could still feel the cloister… something bad happened there, and then we were fully here. Not there at all.”

“Has the Chapter Master been in contact at all? In Mundanus or via a messenger?”

“No, that’s not it.” The gargoyle shook its head. “I don’t think the Chapter is there any more. I think someone…broke it.”

Max looked back up at the grey tiles as he struggled to think despite the morphine haze. “How does someone break a Chapter? Maybe…”

“Look, we reported a serious breach, we showed the Chapter Master a kidnap in progress with the support of the London Arbiters and nothing happens? The Chapter is either cut off or just not there any more. Either way, we’re on our own.”

“Have the London Arbiters followed up?”

“The mundane police got there faster than they did. They were distracted by something, maybe cutting off the Bath Chapter. I don’t know. Anyway, you were brought here and so was the one who shot you. But the London Arbiters busted him out of the morgue.”

“How do you know?”

“I’ve been listening to the police talking. They want to know what you were doing at the top of the hotel.”

“I’m not worried about that,” Max muttered.

“Of course you’re not, I’m worried for both of us.” The gargoyle jabbed its clawed thumb at its chest. “In fact, I passed worried several hours ago and I’m well into the land of seriously frightened. This is bad enough without us being corrupted.” It sniffed at the blanket. “We can’t walk around with titanium in us for eighteen months.”

“I don’t have much of a choice. At least not until I get back to the cloister.”

“If it’s still there.” The gargoyle’s voice matched its grim expression. “And I’m not sure it is, otherwise how could we be having this conversation?”

“Then I’ll go straight to the Sorcerer and tell him and see if he’ll take it out.”

“Are you mad?” The gargoyle’s twitch made the bed shake. “He’ll kill us!”

“I have to report it.”

“These are unusual circumstances, and look, if the Bath Chapter has been cut off – or worse, we’re the only ones who know what’s going on here…” The gargoyle lowered its head and extended its stone body to lean over him as it had out of the clock tower. Its stone teeth were only inches from Max’s nose. “If you tell the Sorcerer about the titanium, he won’t listen and more innocents will be taken. You know what he’s like.”

“It’s a good argument,” Max said, and the gargoyle withdrew. “We have to leave before the London Chapter knows where I am; they won’t be distracted for long.”

Mustering all the effort he could, he sat up and pulled the blanket, and the frame designed to keep it off his bandaged leg, off the bed. He frowned at the hospital gown, wondered where his clothes were. His coat and hat were hung on the back of the door. They’d suffice in the short term. He started to get out of bed.

The gargoyle howled. “Stop! Stop! Oh! The pain, stop!” It was gripping the sides of its head, its stone eyes rolling like marbles in cups.

Max was aware of the pain too. It was rather extreme. He lay back down, scrabbled for the button and pressed it.

“We’re not going anywhere yet,” he said, breathless, as the gargoyle whimpered. “You’d better go back outside; you made enough noise to bring every goddamn nurse in this hospital here.”

He watched the gargoyle leap across to the window ledge as little blue pinpricks of light peppered the outer edges of his vision. “Keep a lookout,” he added, his words slurring.

“Just keep pressing that button,” the gargoyle muttered as it climbed back outside. “And hope that Lord Titanium doesn’t take an interest.”

7

It took two cups of tea and half a bowl of noodles to fortify Cathy enough to pick up the letters and take them through to the front room. She flicked on the light, comforted briefly by the shelves of DVDs, books and the life-size cardboard cut-out of Han Solo standing in the corner.

She dumped the letters on the sofa, closed the curtains and put on the TV. Somehow checking that all of the things she'd set to record whilst she was working at the Emporium seemed so much more important than reading her mother's words. After another sideways glance at the letters, rearranging her entire book and DVD collection alphabetically took on a sudden urgency. She scanned the shelves, dithered over the *Battlestar Galactica* box set for a few moments before plucking out *Aliens* instead. Survival horror seemed more appropriate.

Finally she mustered the courage to read the letters. She had considered burning them, but she'd only wonder what had been said, and besides, if her mother realised she hadn't read a single word when she got back, it would only make things worse.

Cathy turned the pile upside down so the top one would be the first sent. If she was going to do this properly, she needed to see the progression.

She noted the wax seal and quality of the paper. A dull throb was building behind her eyes as she picked it up. She turned it over and read the elegant calligraphy.

Miss Catherine Rhoeas-Papaver,

Where-so-ever-you-are
Mundanus

She shuddered at the sight of her mother's handwriting. Something about the slant of the upward strokes in "Where-so-ever-you-are" conveyed her mother's irritation at her being so difficult to contact and the sight of her full name brought back her old life with a monstrous clarity.

She broke the seal and opened it out. The red poppy of her family's crest was emblazoned at the top of the paper. The date was one week after she'd cast the Shadow Charm and fled Cambridge.

Dear Catherine,

I have no idea what you think you are doing, but I've received a letter from your former chaperone informing me of her resignation and giving profuse apologies that she was unable to improve your wilful nature. She had more courage than your minder who has singularly failed in his duty to keep you safe and seems to have absconded.

I do hope the two of you are not together, lost in the foolish romantic notion of running away to elope. I will be able to keep this from your father for less than a week, so I suggest you return immediately and explain to me why you have abandoned the university course you demanded so brazenly. It embarrassed us immensely to have to acquiesce to such a selfish and unreasonable request. The Patroon was not impressed as you well know.

Do not make this worse. Come back before your father realises what you have done, otherwise I am sure you can predict his response.

Cathy folded the letter and slipped it back into the envelope. It was too easy to predict her father's reaction when he saw her again and she didn't want to think about it. She sucked in a deep breath and made herself eat the rest of the noodles. As she twisted them around her fork she remembered when Josh had introduced them to her as a good thing to keep in the cupboard. They only needed boiling water and were quick to make, as he demonstrated. That was the first afternoon they'd spent together after he came across her in the laundry room of the first-year halls of residence. She was standing in front of the machine with a palm full of coins trying to read the instructions without looking like she had no idea what she was doing.

"Are you OK?" he'd asked and made her jump, sending the coins rolling in all directions. She hadn't got used to men just being able to come and talk to her when she was unchaperoned and her inherent shyness wasn't making it easy to get used to.

They picked up the coins together. She liked his smile and his soft brown eyes. He was skinny and tall and when they stood up again after collecting the errant coins she only came up to his shoulder even though she wasn't exactly short herself.

"Want me to show you how they work?" he offered and she nodded. "You put two fifty-pence pieces in here. Is the powder in?"

She blinked at him. Only two powders sprung to mind: face powder and the powder used in pistols for duelling and she was certain it couldn't be either of them. She regretted not having her laptop and wished she'd Googled it all before leaving her room.

"Washing powder?" he said slowly.

"Oh, is that what goes in that tray bit?"

“So your mum did all your washing then? I’ve got some you can use, give me the fifty pences.”

She searched through the coins in her palm, still getting used to handling change. He gawped at her. “Have you been living abroad or something?”

“…Sort of,” she replied and managed an awkward smile. When he returned it the constant terror she’d felt for the past two weeks subsided. Even though she’d spent an academic year at Cambridge, the maid her family insisted on sending with her dealt with all the practical matters, including all the things involving small change. She researched as much as she could before running away, but it was impossible to learn about every aspect of life in Mundanus, and the more time she spent there the more she realised how ill-prepared she was.

He helped her with the washing machines and chatted as they waited. That was the first time she lied about where she’d come from to someone she wanted to spend time with, and it made her guts knot as she lied again and again, weaving threads of lies to make an unusual but plausible story.

The noodles finished, Cathy turned her attention back to the letters. The next one was similar to the first, only more angry, so she chucked it aside. In the third her mother detailed how the minder had finally turned up, cap in hand, and had been interrogated by her father.

> *He assures us that there were no signs of your plans to leave, and only the brief note you left apologising for the inconvenience is stopping us from assuming you’ve been kidnapped. Your father has not ruled out that possibility, so for goodness sake, Catherine, return home immediately and explain yourself before we’re forced to report this to the Patroon.*

Cathy shook her head at the empty threat. There was no way in the split worlds they'd go to the Patroon and tell him their wayward daughter had run away. She wondered what they'd been telling him. They were lucky he was such a relic and had no real understanding of life in Mundanus anymore. He was hundreds of years old and had no concept of how much the world had changed as he spent all of his time in the Nether. They'd be able to string him along perfectly well until he suspected something and asked for verification from one of the other Papaver lines. If that happened, her family would be in serious trouble.

That made her pause. Was that guilt she felt?

She ripped open the next letter, dated a month after she'd left.

Dear Catherine,

We are beside ourselves with worry and missing you terribly.

Rubbish, Cathy thought, but carried on reading.

I know you must be afraid to come back, but I want you to know I understand this isn't your fault. You were corrupted at a tender age by Miss Rainer. Ultimately, the blame lies with me for letting that evil woman into our household, and I will never forgive myself.

Her wicked scheme to put the most ridiculous ideas into your head and expose you to entirely unsuitable literature is what brought about this terrible situation we find ourselves in.

The words blurred. Miss Rainer. Every single day she wondered what had happened to her old governess. "Ridiculous ideas, Mother?" she muttered under her breath. "I suppose you would call human rights and women's suffrage ridiculous." Cathy looked up at the bookshelves, filled

with “unsuitable literature”: science fiction, fantasy, volumes of political discourse and social history, feminist masterpieces and graphic novels. Pride of place, with a shelf all of their own, were the works of HG Wells, Jules Verne, the *Dune* novels, Asimov and all the others Miss Rainer had smuggled in and hidden under her pillow. Not the originals. They’d been ripped apart and burnt by her father. She could still feel his hand on her throat and smell the burning paper as he’d forced her to watch.

Everything had changed that day. It was hard to believe it had been over four years ago; the memory of it was so fresh. She remembered the beating that had taken weeks to recover from fully, the hours alone, locked in her room, sobbing until the turn of the key in the lock made her wipe her eyes and sit up straight and be polite to whoever came in, be it her mother or the maid. She recalled the hours her mother had spent coaching her in the lead-up to her coming of age, the sleepless nights spent weighing up whether to play by the rules or risk everything on asking for the wrong boon.

It had taken months to get to university. They’d had to say yes, it was the family tradition, but most good little Papaver children diligently requested whatever their parents had told them to.

Cambridge was a stepping stone to freedom; it gave her the chance to get out of the family home, which was her first objective, and saved her from the stress of being launched onto the social scene in Aquae Sulis. Whilst she didn’t have the same freedom as all of the other students there, she had enough exposure to others in lectures and her tutorial partners to learn enough about Mundanus to know where to look for more information. Everyone had computers and it didn’t take much persuasion to convince her minder she needed one for the course. A fellow student bought a dongle for her and helped her get online in return for lunch, and that was the breakthrough she needed. It took a year in Cambridge to plan and execute

her escape to Manchester and it had worked perfectly, until that bastard Shopkeeper had ruined it all by tipping off Lord Poppy.

Cathy still had no idea what happened to Miss Rainer. After the night her father found the books hidden in her room all of her lessons stopped, but she'd learnt enough to know that she could never live the same life as her mother.

She went back to the letter.

> *Your absence has cast a shadow over our household and I am worried about how this is affecting Elizabeth.*

Cathy snorted. Her younger sister was probably still gloating about her victory and was glad that her plain older sister wasn't there to jeopardise her chances of a good marriage. Cathy would never forgive Elizabeth for what she did.

> *Thomas hasn't been the same since he learned of your disappearance and asks whether there has been any news every evening. He's lost weight with worry. I beg you to consider your brother and his feelings, Catherine. I know how close you are.*

It was a low blow and the guilt brought tears with it. She wept at the thought of what Tom must think of her, how he must hate her now for being such a coward and fleeing instead of sticking it out like him. But then he was a son and the eldest child; it was different for him. He wasn't seen as a piece of property but as the heir apparent.

She shoved the rest of the letters onto the floor and let herself curl into a ball. She imagined calling Josh, asking him to come over and telling him everything and somehow coming up with a new solution, but that was a stupid fantasy. Even if he did believe her tale of secret families with Fae

patrons living just outside of everyday reality, she would only endanger him. She wanted to be held, to smell his aftershave and talk about Xbox games and music and do all the stuff that any other student at the same university could do. A week from now she'd be back in Aquae Sulis in her family's grip once more and she would never see Josh again.

She needed a big cup of tea. She wiped her face and blew her nose on the way back to the kitchen. She needed to think, not cry like some helpless woman. Did Ripley fall apart when they were trapped on an alien-infested base with no rescue for days and limited supplies? "No, she did not," she said out loud.

Dealing with her family wasn't as bad as facing aliens with acid for blood, but they were still an unavoidable horror. And failure to impress Lord Poppy would lead to a worse fate than having to face her father again.

As the kettle boiled for the next round of tea, she leaned against the worktop and turned her mind to what she could possibly wish for. The Fae lords and ladies were fickle and fundamentally inhuman. How the Patroons managed to keep them happy she had no idea. She'd spent as little time as possible thinking about politics and the struggles of the Great Families when she was growing up in their world, and for the first time in her life she regretted it. The problem wasn't a lack of ideas; like all Fae-touched children she'd diligently spent days of her early years dreaming up clever wish combinations just in case. She'd never prepared any to impress a Fae, however.

She made the tea, stirred in the milk. There was no one to ask for help, no books to consult, no website designed for fellow escapees of the bizarre Fae-touched life. If only she knew what would–

"That's it!" she said with a laugh. "It's so obvious!" She took a sip of tea and then a deep breath. "I wish–"

With a tiny pop and a shower of poppy petals, the faerie appeared, just above the pedal bin, making Cathy squeak in surprise and drop her mug. It smashed on the lino, the brown liquid landing in the shape of a faerie's silhouette.

"That's not funny," she said to the tiny creature. "How did you get into my flat?" As far as Cathy knew, the Fae and their minions could only get into Mundanus from the Nether, and her flat had no reflection there.

The faerie ignored her question. "You were about to make your first wish," it said in its melodic voice. "I want to know what it is."

"Because you're the one who grants it on Lord Poppy's behalf?"

"I want to watch you make your first mistake." She glanced around the kitchen, wrinkling her tiny nose. "Mundanus smells horrid. Why would anyone ever want to live here? There must be something very wrong with you."

"Do you want me to make this wish or not?"

The faerie clapped its hands. "Yes, I do!"

"I wish I knew how to impress Lord Poppy," Cathy said boldly, pleased with her choice.

A pulse of magic swept out from the faerie as she cast the wish into the world. It looked like a ripple of sparkling water rushing out from her, making Cathy's skin tingle as it passed through her. She held her breath for the answer.

"See you soon," the faerie chirruped.

"What?" Cathy gasped. "My wish first! Tell me how to impress him!"

"Oh, that." The faerie shrugged. "The wish is cast. My work is done."

"But!" Cathy fought not to stammer. "But you haven't told me."

"You never wished for *that*." The faerie stuck out its tiny tongue. "You mortals never learn. You only wished to *know*. You didn't specify *when*."

8

Max slept for over an hour after the police officers left and when he woke his mouth tasted as if something had crawled in there and died.

The police were frustrated but he'd argued that whilst he might have been trespassing on the roof of the hotel, he was still a victim of a gunshot wound rather than a perpetrator. There wasn't much else to go on until various reports arrived, and he suspected they'd want to bury it rather than have to admit the perpetrator's body had gone missing. He noted they neglected to mention that when they interviewed him.

He waited for a nurse and asked if there was a telephone he could use nearby. When she offered to wheel one in he accepted, adding a request for a local telephone directory and a pair of crutches.

"It's a little soon to be using those," she said.

"I've used them before," he lied. "I want to see if I can remember how to do it."

She eventually relented, probably so she didn't have to keep talking to him.

He had to leave before the other Arbiters came for him, and, without support from the Chapter, the only choice was to go directly to Mr Ekstrand, the Sorcerer of Wessex. Max was fortunate that he'd been picked to run the field tests on the glasses (now missing and potentially in an evidence bag somewhere); he was the only Arbiter apart from the Chapter Master who knew where to enter the Nether to find the Sorcerer's house.

Two hours later he was sitting in a white van listening to an innocent talk about the last removals job he'd had. The gargoyle, masquerading as an eccentric garden ornament, was safely loaded in the back and they were heading down the M4 motorway towards Bath.

The conversation was one-sided and that suited Max perfectly. All he'd had to do was explain how he'd had an accident trying to move the gargoyle for a friend, pay the man all the money he had and they were on the road, no more questions asked.

Sweating from the pain, he drifted in and out, his thumb twitching for the morphine button left behind. He had a sense of his coat being too light and patted his pockets. They were empty. Occasionally he thought he could hear scuffs and knocks in the back of the van as the gargoyle fidgeted, but nothing made the driver break his monologue.

The city of Bath was mercifully quiet by the time they arrived. He directed the driver to a street as close as he dared, explaining that a friend would pick him and the statue up. Gargoyle unloaded onto the pavement, hands shaken, wishes of the best offered and Max found himself on a dark road at the edge of Bath.

He looked at the gargoyle. There were two of them briefly. "I can't bear this pain much longer," it said. "Let's find Ekstrand's house. Wait a second." It reached into one of Max's coat pockets and its muzzle wrinkled as it pulled its paw back out again. "Our stuff, what happened to our stuff?" It was rubbing its claws together. "And where did all this powder come from?"

"Ekstrand's first," Max said and limped along on his crutches, heading towards the end of the street. Expecting trouble, he sent the gargoyle off into the shadows when he heard a car pull up where the van had been but moments before.

The click of his crutches on the pavement was much slower than the brisk clip of shoes behind him. He focused on making it to the anchor property as quickly as he could without passing out. There was a scrape of stone on tarmac, a loud thud and then the gargoyle was at his side, taking a crutch and half holding him up.

“Was it an Arbiter?”

“Yeah,” it replied. “Ex Arbiter.”

“You killed him?”

“I dunno. I think so. He was crooked anyway. He was pulling a silenced gun on you, would’ve shot you in the back.”

“We could have questioned him.”

“Oh. Sorry about that. Distracted.” It pointed at the leg in the velcro support. “I’ll clean up after you’re somewhere safe. Get painkillers. Lots of them, OK? Any flavour.”

Max nodded. He saw familiar gates up ahead and the gargoyle didn’t need to be told what to do. It went ahead, bounding down the street and sounding like a stonemason’s hammer.

The gargoyle held up the soul chain, brandishing the Sorcerer’s seal and speaking the words to open the Way. There was a faint shimmer; the gates looked as if they were reflected in water. Max doggedly made the final metres, his shirt soaking wet beneath his suit, his hands blistering on the wooden crutch handles.

The gargoyle helped him step through into the Nether. Max was in so much pain he barely noticed the change in air.

The Sorcerer’s house looked exactly the same as the anchor property; a large Georgian mansion in extensive grounds. But the stars were gone, as was the moon, the sky above them the pale misty silver of the Nether.

The door to the house opened and Max expected the butler to step out but the librarian hurried out onto the drive instead.

She was blonde too. What's with all the blondes? he thought, now aware of a ringing in his ears.

"It's Max, isn't it?" she said. "From the Bath Chapter?"

He managed a nod.

"Oh, you look terrible. Let me help you." She came closer.

Her hair was the colour of sunlight. He wanted to touch it. That didn't seem right. He'd never wanted to touch a woman's hair. She was slender as cigar smoke in a still room, her curves in the right places and very pleasant to the eye. She wore kitten heels and a suit straight out of the best of the Forties' movies. He wanted popcorn and to stand there watching her all day.

"What are you doing with that statue?"

The gargoyle moved and she yelped.

"Hello, beautiful." Its grin made her shudder.

"Slight problem," Max said as she gawped at it. "Need to see the Sorcerer."

"I…I see. It's not one of his better days," she said, keeping an eye on the leering gargoyle. "Come in so Axon can give you some help. You look very ill."

"It's urgent," he added as one of the crutches clattered to the ground and the gargoyle shifted to take most of his weight.

"Come inside," she said and ran ahead calling for the butler.

The gargoyle helped him towards the house. "She's hot."

"She's the librarian," Max replied, struggling to manage the worry about his injuries and the first waves of lust he'd experienced since his soul's dislocation. Both seemed to be seeping into him through his physical contact with the gargoyle.

“A librarian? Even better. She could improve my mind at the same time.”

He recognised the butler, Axon, as he came out and supported his other arm.

“Good evening sir,” he said, as if a man on crutches being half carried by an animated statue were a normal arrival.

“Sorry about the gargoyle, Axon.” Max remembered he was a nice guy, for a butler.

“It’s no trouble sir,” Axon replied and Max believed him. This was probably quite dull for a Sorcerer’s butler.

“If you two can manage, I need to clean that…” The gargoyle’s stone eyebrows twitched back in the direction of the gates.

Max nodded. “Bring the body here.”

“A body too, sir?” Axon enquired. Max nodded. “Very good, sir.”

Max made it into the house and was steered towards a large, familiar sitting room. It was cluttered with several lifetimes’ worth of objects. On his previous visit, a collection of tiny ivory figurines had caught his eye. This time it was a clock lying partially dismantled on the writing desk in the corner of the room. The room smelt of camphor, a hint of engine oil and wood smoke from the fire.

Two overstuffed sofas dominated the centre and he was eased onto one of them. Axon excused himself, promising to return swiftly, then the librarian reappeared, carrying a bowl and some muslin cloths.

“It’s Petra, isn’t it?” he asked as she rearranged cushions and then helped him to take off his coat and jacket, and eased him down to lie flat.

“That’s right.” She smiled. “What happened to you?”

“Got shot and fell off a clock tower.”

“Oh dear.”

She rinsed out the cloth and wiped his forehead. The cloth was cool, and for the first time since waking up in that hospital Max felt unlikely to die any time soon. With the gargoyle elsewhere he was free of emotional distractions once more.

Axon returned with a large leather doctor's bag and Petra left the damp cloth on his forehead, promising to look for the Sorcerer. Something happened involving a syringe and the blissfully fuzzy feeling returned as he floated away from the pain.

"Is the gargoyle back?" he asked.

"It's in the parlour," Axon replied. "I thought it better to warn Mr Ekstrand first, rather than an animated statue be happened upon unprepared in the receiving room."

"And the body?"

"All taken care of, sir. May I suggest a restorative cup of tea and some light refreshments?"

Max nodded.

"I will prepare a room for you too, sir. I imagine you will be staying here tonight."

"No, I'll go back to the cloister when I'm done."

Axon conveyed concern, impending bad news and slight embarrassment at having to contradict a guest, all with just a minor adjustment of his eyebrows, in that way only butlers can. "I will leave that discussion to Mr Ekstrand." He turned to go and then paused. "I assume the gargoyle does not require refreshments?"

"I don't think so. Should it?"

"I imagine not, sir, being of a stone constitution, but I find it best to never assume anything when it comes to matters of unnatural animation."

Max watched him go, feeling exhaustion lapping at his edges in little waves. He almost drifted off to sleep, but the arrival of the promised tea perked him up.

“I really do think you should speak to him, Mr Ekstrand. He may have important information.” Petra’s voice drifted in from the hall as he stuffed a sandwich into his mouth.

There was a low mumble, then Axon’s voice adding to the mix. Max struggled into a seated position, breaking into a sweat again. He wondered if he’d ever be able to do anything without soaking his shirt.

“He needs rest, sir. I think it advisable to have a brief conversation with him now so that he may be taken to his room to recuperate.”

“Very well.” Mr Ekstrand came to the doorway. He looked very different compared to the last time Max had visited. Instead of an elegantly cut Edwardian suit, the Sorcerer was wearing loose cotton trousers made from un-dyed linen and a loose smock-style shirt. Both looked handmade, the design favouring comfort over style. He was barefoot, and around his neck hung close to three dozen pendants of different shapes and colours, each of them a magical artefact.

Ekstrand’s long face was in keeping with his tall and thin frame, his black hair was in disarray and he hadn’t shaved that day. This was not the image that Sorcerers tended to offer of themselves. Max had the distinct impression he’d arrived at a bad time.

“I recognise you.” The Sorcerer pointed a long index finger at him from the doorway. “You’re the one I gave the glasses to.”

“Yes, sir,” Max replied. “Please excuse me for not getting up, I–”

“Did they work?”

“What?”

“The glasses, fool!”

“Yes, they did. But I need to tell you–”

“Where are they?” Ekstrand came into the room, but stayed some distance away from Max’s sofa. “Are they in your pocket?”

“No, sir, I was shot and fell from a clock tower and when I woke in the hospital they were gone.”

“Gone!” Ekstrand shrieked. “They were with you yesterday, in Mundanus?”

Max nodded.

Ekstrand groaned. “They were unique!”

“Tea, sir?” Axon picked up the teapot. Ekstrand peered at it suspiciously.

“It is Assam, isn’t it, Axon?”

“Indeed, sir.”

“All right,” he muttered and started to pace. “It’s all happening at the same time. I never did trust Sundays and this only adds weight to my theory.”

Petra followed him in and sat down with a notepad and pen. “Mr Ekstrand, I understand how troublesome Sundays can be, but I really do think you ought to sit down, have a cup of tea and listen to what Max has to say. It’s very important.”

Ekstrand scowled at Petra for a moment and then relented, sitting down stiffly on the opposite sofa. Axon poured the tea as the Sorcerer peered over the tray at Max.

“Are you here to apologise for losing my glasses?”

“No, sir. I’m here because I think something has happened to the Chapter.”

Ekstrand’s eyes narrowed. “You do, eh?” He accepted the cup and saucer presented to him by the butler and sipped at the tea. He visibly

relaxed. “I’ll listen to you. It goes against all my rules, but when Petra and Axon agree on something being an emergency on a Sunday evening I’d be foolish not to listen. Battenberg?”

Max nodded. He started at the beginning, explaining how Montgomery had got in touch, how he’d got permission from the Chapter Master to go and investigate purely off the record. He described the connections he’d made with the Judd Street agency, how the Arbiter had sat back as the kidnapping took place, the gunshot on the roof of the hotel.

Ekstrand listened attentively as he chewed on the pink and yellow cake, Petra taking notes all the while. As he’d agreed with the gargoyle, Max didn’t mention the titanium pins in his leg. Seeing the Sorcerer dressed so strangely made him suspect he’d made the right decision. Then he told him about the gargoyle.

“And that’s why I came straight to you,” he said as Axon took his plate and refilled his teacup. “I think the gargoyle…situation is an indication of something happening to the Chapter, as well as the lack of support and clean-up in London.”

Ekstrand handed his cake plate to Axon, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. “Where is this gargoyle, Axon?”

“In the parlour, sir.”

“Bring it in here. And be careful.”

Ekstrand stared at Max as they waited for the gargoyle to be brought in. Max stared back, wondering why the Sorcerer seemed so different from the capable and brilliant man who’d given him the glasses just days before. Had something happened to him too?

“Do you know if something has happened to the Chapter, sir?” he asked.

“I’m not going to talk to you about it. How do I know you’re not responsible?” Ekstrand replied.

“Mr Ekstrand,” Petra said, her voice as smooth as a fine single malt. “Max needs our help.”

The Sorcerer pursed his lips and said nothing more until Axon returned with the gargoyle. Ekstrand leapt to his feet, eyes wide as the gargoyle gave a small, awkward wave.

“Evening,” it gravelled.

“In all the worlds,” Ekstrand whispered. “I have never seen its like.”

The gargoyle winked at Petra who looked down at her notepad.

“Do you…feel anything?” Ekstrand asked.

“Glad to be here,” the gargoyle replied. “It was getting a bit hairy at the hospital. I kept seeing Arbiters in all the shadows. One tried to kill us on the way here, you know. A London Arbiter. In Bath. It’s not right, I tell you.”

“And how do you explain your state?” the Sorcerer asked, getting closer.

“We were connected,” it said, jerking a claw towards Max. “Up on the clock tower.”

“As I said, I was using a deep connection to gather evidence for the Chapter Master,” Max said, watching the Sorcerer just as carefully as the gargoyle was.

Ekstrand nodded. “That’s the only reason you’re still alive. The soul vessels in the Cloister were destroyed, as far as I can tell, but you were in such close contact, the connection pulled your soul into Mundanus, into this gargoyle.”

The gargoyle’s mouth dropped open. “Destroyed?” It clutched the sides of its head. “What about the others?”

“All the Arbiters in the field dropped dead. I have no idea what happened to the rest; there’s been no contact.”

“That’s…oh, shit…that’s terrible!”

“It’s most certainly inconvenient. Luckily for you,” he said to Max, “I added an extra function to my formula, detailing that the soul chains should only be destroyed if the Arbiter were dead. Otherwise you’d have died too. Now you’re the only Arbiter left from the Bath Chapter.”

Max recalled the powder in his pockets. “You worked a formula to destroy our field equipment?”

“Of course. Arbiters were dropping dead in Mundanus, I couldn’t have mundane authorities finding a Peeper and working out what it was for. I should have added an exclusion clause for my glasses though.”

The gargoyle sank down onto its haunches and looked as if it was trying to cry. Without tears it just looked miserable and made an awful rasping sound deep in its throat.

“Absolutely fascinating,” commented Ekstrand, observing its distress. “And a terrible liability. If any of the Fae or their puppets were to get hold of him, we’d be in a lot of trouble. And you,” he pointed at Max, “would be susceptible to their magic. The gargoyle has to stay here. We can’t have your soul chain running around independently of you.”

“Can’t we take it off it?” Max asked.

“Too much of a risk for now. It’s probably the only thing keeping your soul inside it. You wouldn’t want to lose your connection.”

“And what about me?”

“I suppose you’ll have to stay as well,” Ekstrand said, clearly not happy about it. “You’re practically useless in your current state, and you have no cloister to be healed in.”

Max nodded. “I’m the only eyewitness. When you approach the Essex Sorcerer you’ll need me to give evidence.”

Ekstrand shook his head. “Not for that, for something in Bath, or rather Aquae Sulis. One of the most important people in Fae-touched society has disappeared, and with all this nonsense going on I haven’t had anyone to investigate it.”

“But there are innocents being taken in London,” Max said. “There are corrupt Arbiters and now they’ve destroyed the Bath Chapter to cover it up.”

“Don’t you care?” the gargoyle asked. “Arbiters are supposed to be incorruptible, how has this even happened? What else are they up to in London? Why are they working with the Rosa family?”

“I’ll deal with that another time,” Ekstrand said, irritated.

“Another time?” the gargoyle straightened up. “It has to be dealt with now, before more innocents are taken!”

“You,” Ekstrand pointed at the gargoyle’s chest, “are nothing more than a dislocated soul trapped in an ugly statue and have no right to question my judgement. Besides, any sane individual knows it’s utter madness to deal with any serious problems on a Sunday.” He scratched his head and shivered. “Which reminds me, I need to check the wards, especially with the two of you in the house. Axon, find suitable arrangements for these two, would you?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I haven’t finished with you,” he said, giving Max one last suspicious look, and then hurried out of the room.

Max dropped his head back on the sofa cushions. Ekstrand was more concerned about a Fae puppet than his Chapter, Arbiters had tried to kill him – twice – and he was corrupted with Titanium. It hadn’t been the best

weekend. The gargoyle's head settled on the arm of the sofa with a suitably grim expression.

"The Sorcerer of Wessex is mad as a nail," the gargoyle whispered. "We're buggered."

9

Cathy watched the sun come up over the city. Everything she did was punctuated by a sense of finality. This might be the last time she saw in the dawn in Manchester. This might be the last morning she woke as a free woman. This was the last day she would ever see Josh.

She had to end it. Her family could turn up any moment, and she wanted to make sure Josh didn't worry about her after she'd gone. She didn't want to do to him what she'd done to her family a year before. Again, the guilt. She banged her forehead against the window gently, hating herself.

Perhaps this is what it's like when you only have a week left to live, she caught herself thinking, and then immediately pulled herself up. She couldn't think like that. It wasn't over. Besides, millions of people suffered much worse every day.

It didn't make her feel any better.

The appalling night's sleep had been a mess of regrets and fears but she had managed to make one decision: she was going to make arrangements to keep the flat as long as she could and for all of her stuff to go into storage. She had to believe there was a way to escape again and when she did she'd want somewhere to go in Mundanus. If it took longer than the length of the lease at least her stuff wouldn't be thrown out in her absence. There was enough money in her account to keep it going for the rest of the agreed lease and to pay for storage. Then she realised her mother might ask for the

jewels she'd sold to fund her escape. The forehead was banged against the window again.

As she dressed in jeans and a top (for the last time?) and dragged a brush through her hair, her thoughts returned to the botched wish. It was the price of being outside Society for so long. She'd got slack and forgotten the first rule of wish-making: be specific.

Then she was thinking about Josh again, as if there were only two topics her head could contain. She felt like a ping-pong ball being batted between them.

She had to think like a member of the Great Families, not a freakish runaway. What could she wish for to help her survive once they'd dragged her back? Would it impress Lord Poppy to go back to Aquae Sulis and dance, sing and play the piano even better than her odiously perfect younger sister? Or would it be better to wish she could speak every language in the world? That had always been a secret wish and one that would be useful if she did find a way to freedom in Mundanus. *When* she found a way; she had to stay positive.

It was tempting, but Lord Poppy probably didn't even realise people in Mundanus spoke different languages. She had a vague memory of a lesson in her youth in which she was told the Fae could understand and converse with anyone, universally understood. She couldn't remember why. Perhaps this is what it's like to go mad, she thought as she pulled on her boots and grabbed her jacket. To think the most stupid, irrelevant things instead of a way to avoid a terrible fate.

She had to get out and walk.

Manchester sparkled in the dawn's gentle sunshine, a delicious assortment of deep-red brick and glass and steel. The shops were still closed, the streets relatively empty. She found a greasy-spoon café and

ordered a coffee and breakfast, only to push most of it around the plate. She headed further into the city as it woke, finding herself in crowds of people hurrying to work.

The sense of finality lingered. Cathy took in deep lungfuls of the air, appreciating its freshness and the gentle blue of the morning sky. Like all Fae-touched children she had been raised in the mundane nursery wing of the family home. The rest of the house, on the other side of the door she was never allowed to go through without a nanny, was in Aquae Sulis. As she got older she was brought through into the Nether reflection of the house more often and every time she got back to her room she'd open the window as if she'd been forced to hold her breath. In the Nether there was no breeze, no weather as there was in Mundanus, nothing but a silver sky. There wasn't even day and night.

She passed the red plaque she'd sought out the first day she arrived in the city, before she'd even arranged a place to stay or used the Persuasion Charm on the university admissions tutor. She didn't need to read the words to know what it said.

"On August 16 1819 a peaceful rally of 60,000 pro-democracy reformers, men, women and children, was attacked by armed cavalry resulting in 15 deaths and over 600 injuries."

Peterloo. The last lesson Miss Rainer gave to her before her radical education was discovered and punished. The beginning of Cathy's true rebellion.

As she walked down Peter Street, Cathy thought of the women who had been in that crowd, in their beautifully white Regency dresses, cut down by Hussars who targeted them for being so outrageous as to participate in a political rally. Their world wasn't much different from the one she was

being sucked back into, and yet they were brave enough to take a stand when the majority of society decried them.

What if she were to wish for–

“Cathy!”

Josh bounded up to her in his Labradorish way and scooped her up into a hug, lifting her off the ground. She tried not to breathe in the gorgeous smell of him, studiously looking away from his large brown eyes and messy dark hair. The last thing she wanted to see was his lips and how kissable they were, so she tucked her face into his shoulder and let him squeeze her.

“Hi,” she managed to say, returning the hug and worrying about the lump in her throat. He set her down on the pavement.

“I missed you. How was your aunt?”

“Not so good,” she said, remembering the lie.

“Sorry to hear that. You OK?”

She didn’t let him go, not wanting him to see her face as she struggled to get a grip of herself. “Yeah,” she croaked, and he pulled her back into his embrace.

“You free this morning? Let’s do stuff and then have lunch afterwards,” he suggested. “Forbidden Planet’s got some new stock I want to show you.”

This wasn’t how she’d planned it. Not how she’d expected it to be, anyway. She’d got as far as imagining seeing him at the restaurant and at least saying they had to talk, then there was just a mess of emotion. Uncertain how to handle the inevitable break-up, she nodded, deciding that she couldn’t just split up with him in the middle of the street.

He took her hand, then let go and threw his arm about her shoulders, pulling her against him so they walked with their sides touching. He was wearing a military-style jacket and skinny jeans. The top of her head came to his shoulder. His height usually made her feel safe and was one of the

first things that had attracted her to him. That, and the kindness he'd shown her when she'd been struggling to get to grips with real student life.

She remembered his amazement when she'd been confused by a comment he'd made about *The Time Machine* by HG Wells. Even though the nursery wing had been in Mundanus they were still cut off from everyone else so she'd never watched television and didn't even know about a cinema until she arrived at Cambridge. Her minder wouldn't allow her to go or do anything beyond studying for her degree, so she never actually saw a film there.

"You've never seen a film? Where the hell did you grow up?"

That was when she told him the biggest lie; that her family was part of a cult that lived separately from society. It was as close to the truth as she could get; they had their own rules and morality, shunned contact with outsiders and considered their way of life superior to those outside.

"I ran away," she told him and immediately regretted it. Would he think badly of her?

"Why?"

"Because they don't believe girls or women have the same rights as men. They'd marry me off and make me do what they want. I just don't…I just didn't fit in there."

"That sucks," he finally said. And that was it.

He made it his personal mission to educate her about sci-fi's transition from paper to film. Somewhere between *This Island Earth* and *Forbidden Planet* they'd started to hold hands. They kissed halfway through *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* and by *Fantastic Voyage* they were almost inseparable. He'd lovingly introduced her to *Star Wars* in the original film release order, and she realised she loved him at the end of *Raiders of the*

Lost Ark. By *Back to the Future III* he'd confessed he felt the same, inspired by the scene between Clara and Doc Brown stargazing together.

It would have been perfect if it hadn't been for the curse, but in a way that only deepened her trust. He didn't mind waiting, thinking that her reluctance to do more than kiss was a wound from a childhood with religious extremists.

As they walked, he told her about what he'd been doing while she'd been away, but all she could think about was how and where to tell him. Did she spend one last morning with him and tell him over lunch? Did she do it now, before it got too difficult?

Then they were in the shop, greeted warmly by the bloke behind the counter, and Josh was bouncing about the latest reboot.

"I need a cup of tea," she said and he put the comic down.

"Are you feeling poorly?"

"I didn't sleep well."

"How come?"

"I really need some tea," she said, and hurried out of the shop.

"What's wrong?" he asked, following her out and catching hold of her hand. "Is it your aunt? Is she really sick?"

"No." Her voice wobbled and she looked up at the bright shop sign, avoiding his eyes.

"You can tell me, Cathy, come on."

"I'm leaving Manchester."

There was a long pause. "When?"

She shrugged. "In the next couple of days…by next week I think."

"But what about your course?"

"I can't do it any more."

"Have you talked to your tutor?"

“No, I mean, I…it’s not too hard, I mean…I can’t.”

He frowned, standing directly in front of her, drawing her eyes, and she immediately regretted it. She hadn’t realised how much she’d planned ahead until it was all over. She’d finish her degree, they’d get a place together and see if it worked out. She’d find a way to unravel the curse, they’d–

“Has this got something to do with your weird family?”

“I can’t talk to you about it.”

“Shit. Are they putting pressure on you?”

“I said–”

“Because they can’t make you leave, you know. They don’t pay for your course, you’re in control.”

She frowned at his chest, trying to work out how to end it cleanly, with respect and love. This was heading in the wrong direction.

“It’s not that simple,” she said, pulling away from him, feeling sick. “We have to split up.”

She felt like she’d just kicked a puppy. His eyes widened and for a few moments he just looked confused.

“Why?”

“Because they won’t let me see anyone.”

“What, they’re going to lock you away and tell you who you see and who you don’t?”

Hearing the truth, she started to walk away, fearing she’d make it worse if she said any more.

“Cathy! Are you really dumping me?”

She stopped and turned around slowly. “Yeah.”

“What the fuck?”

“It isn’t anything to do with you, it’s my family! You just have to accept it. OK?”

“No, it’s not fucking OK! We’ve been going out with each other for over a year. I’ve tried to understand all that baggage you’ve got from them. I’ve been patient, I never pushed it with you, and you’re just–”

“What, you waited all that time to get into bed with me and now you’re pissed off because you didn’t get what you wanted?”

“No, I’m just saying that–”

“Because I thought you were with me because you wanted to be with me, not just waiting around until we could have sex.”

“Jesus, Cathy, what is wrong with you? You’re sounding like some mad woman. What the hell happened in London? Did they put the fear of God in you again?”

She closed her eyes, put her hands over her face as she tried to string her tiny beaded thoughts into something useful. “I’m so sorry. I love you, but it’s best for both of us if we just split up now and be done with it.”

“How can that be the best thing?” He reached towards her, but she stepped away. “Why let them carry on ruining your life?”

“They’re not just weirdoes, they’re dangerous!” she blurted, and then swore under her breath. He just looked even more confused. “I just need you to let me go. And to forget we were together.”

“Bollocks. Not when you say something like that. We’re going to the police.”

“No, we’re not!”

“You know they have people who specialise in this kind of stuff? Just because your family are religious weirdoes it doesn’t mean they have to ruin your life too. You got away from them once, don’t let them suck you back in.”

This was getting out of hand. The gentle approach wasn't working, and she could see him escalating it into something horrific. If her family found out about him, they'd…

"Cathy?"

She remembered Elizabeth. How many times had her spiteful sister broken hearts and laughed at the consequences? "I just don't want to be with you anymore. OK? It's nothing to do with my family." She thought back to her mother, how cold she could be. "I just made that stuff up, I just can't face the thought of…being with you like that."

He was turning a horrible grey colour. "So you weren't screwed up at all. You just wanted to string me along?"

"Yes." She wanted to chew out her own heart.

"Why?"

"Because I thought it was funny."

His mouth was hanging open. With horror she realised his eyes were glistening. "How could I have been so wrong about you?"

"Probably because you were only thinking about one thing." She smothered her own thoughts and feelings as she took on the necessary role. "That's what men are like, isn't it? Any hole's a goal?"

"Not me!" he yelled. "Fuck. I wasted a year on you?"

"See? I told you! If it wasn't what you wanted, it wouldn't have been a waste!"

"That's not what I meant!" He ran his hands through his hair. "Why are you being like this? This isn't you."

"This is what I'm really like. I…I wanted to see what it was like to go out with a total loser. I'm not going back to a cult." The words gushed, her brain didn't engage. "I'm going back to a bloody rich family and they don't want me to waste my time on sad bastards like you."

“I’m not a…I could’ve gone out with anyone I wanted!” he yelled.

“Yeah, right! Mr Geek thinks he’s God’s gift to women, now that’s funny!”

“Why are you being such a bitch?”

“Why aren’t you getting it, Josh? You’re not the one who wasted a year, *I* was. So go on, find all those women desperate to go out with you instead!”

“I bloody well will!”

He didn’t move. He was making this so much harder. Cathy felt a rush of pure fury at the way he just wouldn’t let go. “Well, go on then! I wish you would find them, then I wouldn’t have to look at your sorry face any more!”

Her skin tingled, the sparkling ripple she’d seen in the flat the night before raced out from a spot behind a nearby waste-paper bin, snapped her out of the brutal desire to push him out of her life for his own good.

“Josh–”

“Just…fuck off, Cathy.”

He staggered into the road. She could hear the faerie laughing, tuned into its high pitch. Cathy burst into tears at the sight of his distress, hating herself more than she thought possible, fear and guilt rushing in to replace the anger. But she couldn’t take back what she’d said, and even though she wanted to gouge her own eyes out for hurting him so, it was still better than her family getting hold of him.

She headed for the faerie, hoping to grab it and throttle it until it took back the magic. The evil thing must have been spying on her and there was no way anything the spiteful creature had cast would be good for Josh. A screeching of tyres and a nauseating thud made her spin around to see Josh rolling along the ground in front of a black Lamborghini. She wanted to

scream and run to him, but the air around her felt soupy, her body frozen in shock.

The driver's door opened and a redhead who was seventy per cent legs, thirty per cent Gucci, jumped out and ran to her victim. Josh rolled over and stared at the redhead but Cathy still couldn't move. It was like a film playing out in front of her, one in which she'd once been the lead.

The redhead gushed an apology and then an introduction; Josh mumbled his name back, still groggy. Cathy watched in disbelief as she helped him to his feet, white with shock, a gash on his forehead bleeding impressively, and got him into the passenger seat. The woman gave her the briefest glance, said "I'm taking him to the hospital, all right?" and got back in.

The car sped off, leaving Cathy in a momentary stupor before she remembered the faerie. It was hovering behind the litter bin, clutching its sides as it squeaked with laughter.

She glanced up and down the street, fearful of being spotted by an Arbiter. She'd never seen one before, but if there was ever going to be an occasion that precipitated the first time, this was it.

"You stupid, evil little–" Cathy swiped at it, hoping to grab hold of the tiny creature and crush it.

"Do you mean me or you?" it said, dodging her effortlessly. "If only complete idiocy would impress Lord Poppy, you'd be his favourite by far."

"I didn't mean to wish that! It wasn't one of my three wishes!"

The faerie made a pretence of yawning. "Oh, how many times have we heard a mortal say that? Too late, Miss Plain, your favourite mundane is now as irresistible to women as you wished."

"I never wished that!" she yelled.

“You wished he would find all the women who were desperate to be his girlfriend. Well, what better way than to bring one straight to him? My Lord’s magic is too powerful for you to cope with.”

“What about the answer to my first wish?” Cathy wasn’t certain she could handle this much longer.

It waved a tiny finger at her. “I told you, you didn’t express an exact time.”

“And Josh, what about him? Will the wish last forever?”

“He’s only a smelly mundane. Lord Poppy didn’t place any limits on the wishes. He’ll never be short of female company until the day he dies.”

“You’re telling me that his life is going to be changed forever because I didn’t specify an absolute?” Cathy kicked the bin. “God, you sound like a bloody lawyer!”

The faerie flew back in disgust. “How dare you! I’ll tell my master!”

“Come back here, you little elf-dropping, tell me how to fix it.”

The faerie floated back slowly. “You could use your third wish…” It pretended to look shocked. “Oh, but then you’d have run out of chances to impress my Lord. What. A. Shame.”

How could she have messed it up so catastrophically *twice*? Once was bad enough. She could still see Josh’s face and the hurt she’d caused. Cathy wiped the tears from her cheeks, feeling a pressure in her sinuses that distracted her from wanting to smear the faerie across the pavement.

A can clattered down the street towards her as if it had been kicked, but there was no one else there. The faerie started to snigger again as cigarette butts, sweet wrappers, leaves and other bits of street debris began rolling towards Cathy from all directions. The pressure in her skull increased and with horror she realised what was happening.

“They’re coming!” the faerie cheered and disappeared with a tiny pop.

It was a Seeker Charm. Disastrous wishes or not, it was all over.

10

William Reticulata-Iris looked out on Aquae Sulis, the glorious Bath stone and pristine Georgian buildings a welcome sight. It was quiet; those in Society rarely strolled before eleven in the morning and had no need to walk to and from shops as the mundanes did, so the streets of Aquae Sulis were usually quiet anyway.

“Another beautiful day in the Nether,” he said to Roberts, looking up at the silver sky. “I shall miss the blue though.”

“It’s a common problem at the end of a Grand Tour,” the artist replied as he sketched. “Perhaps you could look back up, sir.”

Will did so, glad to be able to look out of windows without having to pose. “Like this?”

“Excellent.”

“I suppose you’ll be glad of the rest,” Will said.

“I only have a month, and then I’m off again with the Wisterias’ youngest.”

“He’s come of age already?” Will tried to remember the boy, but he’d been too bland to make an impression. “Is he travelling alone?” When the artist nodded, Will gave him a sympathetic glance. “Less fun for you, old chap. Thank goodness Oliver could travel with me, otherwise you’d have been forced to entertain me as well as record the journey.”

“I’m sure you would’ve been able to find your own entertainment without any help from me, sir,” Roberts said with a smirk. “Never have I had so many evenings off on an assignment.”

“That doesn’t leave this carriage, Roberts.”

“I am the epitome of discretion,” Roberts said. “I’m not the most sought-after Tour artist just because I can sketch in a moving carriage.”

The carriage turned a corner and began to climb another hill. They were on the last stretch. Will checked his cravat and put on his gloves. “It’s been a pleasure travelling with you, Roberts. I’ll write a letter of commendation for your portfolio and I’m sure Mother will give you a generous gift once she sees the painting of the Alpinums.”

“It has been a mutual pleasure, sir,” Roberts replied as the carriage stopped.

The footman opened the door and unfolded the step. Will jumped out of the carriage, eager to stretch his legs. The family home was, as expected, unchanged, nestled between two other splendid townhouses of the Royal Crescent.

The butler opened the door as he approached, a broad smile on his face. Pleasantries were exchanged as his luggage was unloaded from the carriage, and his gloves and cane were taken. He was ushered towards the drawing room where his family were waiting.

“William!” His mother was the first to rush over and embrace him. She didn’t look a day over twenty, her chestnut-brown hair arranged to frame her face beautifully. “Look at you!”

His father greeted him with a firm shake of the hand as his mother kissed him on the cheek.

“You left a boy and returned such a handsome young man!” she said, smiling proudly.

“You’re as brown as a filthy stableboy,” Nathaniel said, stepping forward to shake hands as Father withdrew. “Mother, stop making such a fuss, he’s barely inside the room.”

She allowed William to enter. His elder brother's handshake was just as painful as he remembered; Nathaniel was still unable to greet him without trying to prove who was the more important. Will did his best to return the gesture, earning a twitch of Nathaniel's left eyebrow.

"Seems that life amongst the savages suits you, brother," Nathaniel remarked, and moved away to allow his elder sister to have her turn at putting Will in his place.

"William," she said, with a cold smile. "How delightful to see you again." She came over and planted a kiss on his other cheek. He liked how she had to stand on tiptoes to do so. She looked more like Mother than he remembered.

"You are a picture, Imogen," he said as his hand luggage was brought in. *And little more*, he thought, but didn't voice it.

As he accepted her kiss, he saw his uncle waiting his turn. "Uncle Vincent!" He was glad to see his favourite had been invited. Uncle Vincent was the only one in the room who looked older since the last time Will saw him, older even than his father, despite the fact that he was Father's younger brother. He'd clearly been having too much fun in Mundanus. Will made a mental note to arrange lunch with him to hear the juicy details.

"And me!" The little voice heralded an awkward silence.

He searched for its source and saw a small girl with one hand clutched around one of the silken folds of his mother's gown, the other waving to him. Her hair was lighter than his siblings, but she had his mother's eyes, like they all did.

"This is Sophia," his mother said.

"You're no longer the baby of the family," Nathaniel chipped in.

"I'd like to think I haven't been the baby for some time," Will replied, covering his shock. A fourth child? He glanced at Father but he was cutting

the end off a cigar and handing it to Uncle Vincent. He looked back at the small girl who had taken a tentative step towards him. He opened his arms and a delighted smile made her face angelic as she bounced over to be picked up.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him as the others had. “Hello, Will-yum.”

“Hello, Sophia,” he replied, and earned another kiss.

“She has a tendency to do that,” Nathaniel muttered, but Will simply kissed her back, earning a roll of the eyes from his brother but a sparkling grin from Sophia, which seemed much better value.

“Are you home forever now?”

“Yes.”

“Will you come and play in the Mundanus garden with me? Imogen won’t.” She pouted at her elder sister whose nose tilted upwards.

“Catching a ball is simply not incentive enough for losing one’s youth,” she said.

Will had a sudden craving for the mundane woman he’d chased through the surf on the coast of Sicily. Her skin was bronzed, she’d exuded life, and hadn’t given a moment’s care to whether the sun and sand would age her. His sister looked like a pale feather of a girl in comparison. All of them would now.

“I’ll come and play catch with you,” he said to Sophia. “It’s all right for big brothers to age a little.”

“Only enough to lose their boyish faces,” his mother said. “And, at the right time, to edge carefully towards distinguished.” She nodded towards Father. “But one must take care never to overdo it.”

“Would you like a sherry, Uncle Vincent?” Imogen asked, and Nathaniel smirked at her timing.

Will had almost forgotten what it was like to constantly be on guard. Oliver, his best friend and middle son of the Peonia family, was delightfully straightforward in comparison to his barbed siblings, and had been a fine companion for the Grand Tour. Will hoped all his time with Oliver and Roberts hadn't rusted his social armour.

"Time for your gifts, I believe," he said, setting Sophia down. She lurked near his leg before being coaxed away by their mother.

Sherry was handed out as he opened the smallest of his leather cases. The bag had been with him for the entirety of the trip, either held in his own hand or in sight as it was carried by porters or bellboys. It had been up mountains and down into dingy nightclubs all over Mundanus, in the finest guest bedrooms of the grandest Nether houses all over the world. He was pleased by the way it also had aged just enough.

He lifted out the first box, one of the largest in the bag, and held it towards his father. "For the man who wants for nothing."

His father set his glass down, rested the cigar on the edge of an ashtray and crossed the room as the family watched. Will could still remember all of the gifts Nathaniel had brought back after his tour and he wanted to outdo every single one.

Father set the box down on a nearby table, unwrapped the plain brown paper and uncovered a humidor made of the most beautiful walnut. An unimpressed snort came from his brother's direction.

"The gift is inside," Will said. The box was opened and a row of cigars revealed. "There are three dozen Cohiba cigars that I personally commissioned from the owner of the company, using a blend hand-picked by their best tobacco expert." He lowered his voice and leaned closer to his father. "They were hand-rolled on the thighs of a virgin Cuban girl with a

face like an angel. I took the liberty of using a discreet Charm to put a little of her innocence into each one. It will make for an interesting smoke."

His father actually looked intrigued, lifting one out to run it under his nose. Will noted how Nathaniel picked that moment to refill his glass and felt the warm glow of personal satisfaction. "I'll save my first for after dinner. It's a most thoughtful gift, thank you."

"Your gift next, Mother, I'll just have it brought in."

He waved the footman in who'd been waiting in the hallway. He was carrying a painting wrapped in layers of fabric and canvas to protect it, and once it had been balanced on the arm of a chair it was unwrapped for her.

The painting was of her sister's family, with Will seated next to his cousins. "I had Roberts paint it when we visited Austria," he said, delighted by his mother's astonished gasp.

"Clara doesn't look a day older! And her sons aren't nearly as handsome as you, Will." She radiated delight. "What a beautiful gift, thank you, darling."

He earned another kiss from his mother and a slight frown from Nathaniel. "And now you, dear brother," he said, returning to his bag. "I searched the world for something more dangerous than you and your sword."

Nathaniel laughed. "That's an impressive challenge to set for yourself. Did you succeed?"

"Oh, yes." Will gave his most devilish smile, and when he was sure everyone's anticipation had been built to perfection, he pulled out the tiny package. There was a titter from Imogen and Uncle Vincent. "But first, you need to put these on." He produced a pair of leather gloves with a flourish that drew the family closer.

Nathaniel put them on, looking Will in the eye as he did so. Then he ripped off the paper and plucked out one of the chilli peppers from their wrapping. “Is that it?” he asked.

“That, dear brother, is the hottest chilli pepper in the world. It’s called the ‘Trinidad Scorpion Butch T’.”

“What a vulgar name,” Nathaniel said with a sniff.

“It was grown in Australia, I watched this batch being picked. Try it, if you dare.”

“After I’ve seen what you’ve brought for everyone else,” Nathaniel said.

“Coward,” Imogen prodded him. “Go on. I want to see if it makes you cry.”

“I will if you will,” Nathaniel said, holding it out to his brother.

Will had prepared for this moment. “As you wish,” he smiled, and bit a tiny piece off. A beat later Nathaniel did the same. He flushed the same red as Will, but dashed out of the room, coughing.

Will grinned as Imogen applauded him.

“That was a little cruel, William,” Mother said.

“It was nothing worse than what he gave me,” he replied, blinking away the tears that had sprung as he swallowed the sliver of pepper. The weeks of desensitisation had been just enough, though he did fear that he’d never be able to taste anything properly ever again. It was still worth it.

“I hope that’s the last of this childish one-upmanship between you,” his father said, looking unimpressed.

“I doubt there is anything that could follow it, Father,” Will replied.

“It’s just a bit of fun, George,” Uncle Vincent said. “A little healthy rivalry is only natural.”

They exchanged a look that made Will uncomfortable. Again, he was reminded of this life of unspoken things. He sipped the water that the butler had brought in after seeing Nathaniel dash out, and straightened his waistcoat.

“Whilst Nathaniel tidies himself up, I think it’s time for Imogen’s present,” he said, seeing a flicker of excitement cross his sister’s face.

He produced the next package from his bag, a slender box wrapped in oriental paper. “I procured this from a most interesting individual in China,” he said as he handed it to her. “This is the first part.”

She unwrapped it eagerly and pulled the fan out of the box. Spreading it open, she smiled at the blue irises hand-painted in the oriental style. “It’s beautiful,” she said, but he could see she was disappointed.

“The second part is the secret that only the owner of the fan may hear, one that I must pass to you in private.”

Her demeanour shifted into one of delight. “I look forward to it.”

“Uncle Vincent, this is for you,” he said, passing him the gift.

His uncle smiled broadly at the deck of cards.

“Hand-painted and unique,” Will told him. “I’ll tell you about the artist over a game of poker.”

“I’ll hold you to that,” his uncle said with a wink.

“But what about my present?” Sophia asked.

“Darling, William didn’t–”

“I have it in here somewhere,” Will cut in, mouthing an apology to his mother as Sophia rushed over to peep into the bag. “Ah, here it is!”

He produced an ornate key carved out of ivory.

“Oooooh!” Sophia took it. “What does it open?”

“Ah,” Will said, thinking quickly. “That key opens a very special box that can only be opened when you come of age.”

Sophia pouted. “But that’s days and days away!”

Will laughed and pulled out a bag of caramels left over from the journey. “Perhaps these will keep you happy until then.”

Duty discharged, he accepted his glass of sherry as they inspected each other’s presents. Nathaniel eventually reappeared, giving William a glare as he entered.

“I’d take it as a compliment,” Uncle Vincent said to him. “If it had been anything less fiery, it would have insulted your prowess as a swordsman.”

Nathaniel chose to agree, accepting his uncle’s implicit efforts to calm things between them. “That’s a good point, Uncle.” He came over and shook Will’s hand. “Touché, dear brother.”

Their father nodded in satisfaction. “Well, now that William has duly impressed us all, it’s time to let him rest and settle back in.” He came over and put a hand on his shoulder. “A word with you in my study first, William.”

He followed his father out, enjoying the smell of home once again. Beeswax polish mixed with the scent of fresh irises arranged in vases throughout the house. The study was also unchanged.

“You seem to have had a successful trip,” his father said as he sat at his desk and gestured for Will to seat himself opposite.

“It was both enlightening and educational,” Will replied. The Grand Tour had gone out of fashion in Mundanus but still thrived in Nether society and he was glad of it. Four years of travelling from country to country, visiting incredible places in both Mundanus and the Nether, really had broadened his mind, but not in the way his parents hoped. He’d had fun, met many people and forged contacts in the Nether courts abroad that would help him in the future, but he didn’t return full of disdain for the mundane life.

“I appreciate the painting you commissioned for your mother. I know she misses her sister.”

Will gave a gentle nod to acknowledge the compliment.

“Now, to business.” His father leaned forward, resting his elbows on the blotter. His sideburns were peppered with grey, but he still didn’t look anywhere near his age. Not that Will was certain what that was, but he knew his father was over ninety. “But before I begin, I want to know if there’s anything you need to tell me about your trip.”

“I have a veritable smorgasbord of anecdotes that I’ll dine out on for weeks,” Will replied.

“I meant anything that needs to be dealt with discreetly.”

“Don’t worry, Father, I was very careful.”

His father held his gaze for a moment, then nodded. “Good. I didn’t want to hear about illegitimate children or reports of duelling without knowing first.”

Will bit back a comment about knowing how to have fun without it staining one’s shirt. He wondered if Oliver was having the same conversation with his father on the other side of the city.

“Now that you’ve had your Tour it’s time for you to settle down and establish yourself in your own right.”

Will nodded. He’d expected this, just not so soon. He hadn’t even had a chance to unpack. “I understand, although I’m surprised Nathaniel hasn’t married yet. Father, is there some kind of problem?”

“Negotiations for Nathaniel are in progress,” his father replied curtly.

As the heir to the most powerful family in Aquae Sulis, Nathaniel was one of the most eligible bachelors of his generation. As the spare, Will knew that his parents would agonise less over the match they made for him.

“And how are negotiations for my marriage progressing?”

“It’s been decided. We want to announce it at the ball on Friday, if the Censor permits.”

Will breathed slow and steady. He’d known all his life that this time would come. He and Oliver had discussed it at length, speculating about who they’d be promised to whilst they were away. He was glad he’d made the most of the trip – it sounded like his father didn’t want to waste any time. “And who is it to be, Father?”

“Catherine Rhoeas-Papaver.”

Will ensured his face was a mask. Later, in the privacy of his own room, he would swear, but, scrutinised by his father, he simply nodded. “I see.”

“I know she isn’t a beauty, but she secures our alliance with the Papavers, and with that we can control the Council of Aquae Sulis and the city of Bath in totality. The Bath Preservation Trust is well established now and, thanks to our hard work, it’s practically impossible for the mundanes to disrupt the city’s architecture.”

Will struggled to suppress any sign of his disappointment. He’d hoped for Oliver’s sister, who was docile enough to forget about when with a mistress, and a good excuse to spend time on the town with Oliver; or, at a push, Elizabeth Papaver, who made up for her vapid nature with her beauty and musical talent. But Catherine Papaver? She’d been so far down the list he and Oliver had debated on the Rialto in Venice that they’d forgotten about her.

Why her? He wanted to stand up and bang his fist on the table and demand the answer. He’d always been good, he’d worked hard to learn the rules of the game and play his part with perfection. To be matched with the dud of the Papavers’ latest generation was hardly the reward he expected and deserved, but he had to say something polite. “It sounds like a very strategically important match, Father.”

“It’s critical to secure our local interests,” his father replied. “I understand that she’s been in Switzerland for the past three years at a finishing school. Seems the Papavers realised she needed polishing up.”

“Has it worked?”

“I haven’t seen her. Her father has reassured me she’ll be back in time for the Ball. I’m sure they’ll have whipped her into shape.”

Will didn’t raise his hopes. Finishing schools improved posture and table manners but they didn’t give a girl a better face to look at over breakfast every morning. He had to think of the family though, and besides, once she’d given him a son or two he could pack her off to a country house.

“I’m honoured to play such a key role in our family’s fortunes,” he said, making his father smile a little. “I’m sure she’ll have blossomed.”

She couldn’t have got much worse, he told himself. He remembered how bruised his toes had been after she’d trampled on them the night they’d danced years before when they were in their early teens. She had as much grace as a drunken duckling and he had little hope she’d turn out to be a swan.

“Good,” his father said, relieved. “I’m waiting to hear back from the Censor about the announcement, but she’s been rather distracted.”

“Miss Lavandula distracted? Is there a new fashion in town?”

“Her brother is missing.”

Will didn’t hide his surprise. The Master of Ceremonies was the most important person in Aquae Sulis society and his sister, the Censor, was the second. “For how long?”

“Only a couple of days, but the Censor is worried, I can tell you that. Keep an ear open, will you? No one seems to know a thing about where he’s gone. He didn’t leave a note or even mention he’d be leaving.”

“To go missing this close to the start of the season speaks of foul play.”

“It hasn’t been ruled out. But that’s for me and the other members of the Council to worry about. It’s good to have you back in Aquae Sulis, Will.”

“Thank you, Father,” he said and took his leave.

He was unsurprised to find Imogen lurking at the top of the stairs as he went up to change. “William dear, I have a few minutes spare before I leave, would it be a trouble to you to give me the second part of my gift?”

“No trouble,” he said, forgetting that he’d planned to draw it out as long as he could. “Where are you going?”

“Oh, just to the park to promenade with Cecilia. There’s a rumour that some controversial individuals have been petitioning the Censor for entrance to the first Ball of the season and Cecilia always knows the latest gossip. It quite makes up for the fact that she insists upon drinking *coffee* at Lunn’s.”

“Only the most bland adopt such embarrassing affectations,” he said, acclimatising to the tittle-tattle of city life again. “Come to my room, I’ll tell you the secret there.”

The maid was carrying some of his washing out as they arrived. She blushed at him and bobbed a curtsy before hurrying away. He shut the door.

“And how are you, Imogen?”

“Well enough, now tell me this secret!”

He smirked. She hadn’t changed. “The fan had a powerful Charm woven into it at the point of making,” he said in an appropriately conspiratorial whisper. “Should you find yourself at a soirée or ball and wish to look at someone for a length of time beyond that which would be considered decent, simply fan yourself twice and ensure only your eyes are exposed.”

“What will it do?”

“The fan will give you the appearance of looking in the other direction,” Will said, seeing its potential dawn on his sister.

“So no one may deduce the object of my affection. What a delightful gift, Will.” She pecked him on the cheek again. He’d never received so many kisses in one day. In the Nether at least. “I’m pleased to say that I underestimated you. I thought you’d bring back a dull trinket, not something secret and useful!”

He bowed slightly, enjoying her admiration. “As soon as I heard of the craftsman, I knew I had to get one for you. I understand it’s unique in Albion.”

She glowed with delight. “Cecilia will positively die of jealousy. Now, Will dear, seeing as you have given me such a deliciously perfect gift, permit me to give you a secret in return.”

It was a day of surprises. He allowed her to draw him closer.

“I know they’re planning to marry you to Catherine Rhoeas-Papaver,” she began.

“Alas, sister, the secret is already out. Father has just broken the news to me.”

“Ah, but that’s not the secret I had in mind,” she said and patted his hand. “You have my sympathy, by the way. No, I wanted to tell you that Elizabeth, the younger and frankly superior sister, has had her eye on Nathaniel for a long time now. The silly thing has been so desperate to impress him it’s loosened her tongue on more than one occasion.”

“And what has the younger tongue revealed?”

“That Catherine Papaver has a rebellious nature which has been causing her family a great deal of distress. Apparently it was fostered by a governess they sacked shortly before she left for finishing school. If that is indeed where she was sent…” She looked pleased by his frown. “I’d be

careful, Will, there’s nothing more dangerous to a man’s social standing than a wife who refuses to play by the rules. And I do know how fond you are of how others think of you.”

11

Cathy sat on the floor of the living room looking at the boxes stacked around her. She'd been up all night packing and was waiting for the removals company to come and put them in storage.

The Seeker Charm had targeted her and then faded without further incident, leading her to conclude that her brother Tom (assuming it was he who had cast it) must have been outside the city and was travelling there now. The Charm would be cast again when he arrived, and would give him an updated location.

She could run. But where? Why? It would be a waste of time and energy now the Shadow Charm had been removed by Lord Poppy. Without the Shadow Charm there was no way to hide from a blood relative casting a Seeker Charm and they would find her wherever she went in Mundanus or the Nether, not that she'd try to hide in the latter. Aside from family estates dotted around the country most of Fae-touched society lived in Aquae Sulis, Londinium or Oxenford, reflections of Bath, London and Oxford. It made it very hard to hide there without help, and with her only ally now compromised there was no one else to turn to.

Her friend in the flat above had keys and detailed instructions in case Tom didn't let her settle her affairs properly. She'd paid for five years' storage and memorised the contact numbers of all the key parties involved, knowing that she would be unlikely to be able to smuggle anything into Aquae Sulis once her family got hold of her. They'd search her, she knew it. Her father would be looking for books.

If her family was desperate enough to use Charms that powerful in Mundanus, she had to assume Tom would be travelling there as fast as possible. Thankfully her parents distrusted diesel trains and modern jet aircraft, so he'd be restricted to travelling by car. But England wasn't that big; even if he was hunting for her on the other side of the country he'd be in Manchester before the day was out.

It was the first time she'd stopped since she'd got back after the mad dash across the city. Whenever she paused, she shook and cried, so she just focused on practical things, things that could be solved by telephone calls and forward planning. If only surviving the social hell of Aquae Sulis was as easy as mundane planning and logistics.

She'd checked her phone several times but there was nothing from Josh. What was she expecting after what she'd done to him? Snippets of their last conversation were replayed again and again in her memory, flooding her with regret and a gnawing grief. Every hour or so she debated whether to call, but then decided it was best to cut herself off. Better for him. But she worried about his head, and whether that woman had really taken him to hospital.

She picked up the phone, thumb poised to text him, but one arrived before she started to type. Throat tight, she opened it only to find it was from one of her friends.

"Have you seen Hot magazine's homepage? Josh isn't in London, is he? LOL!"

She rummaged in one of the boxes for her iPad and Googled the magazine. The homepage featured an exclusive story about an actress she'd never heard of, but the picture made her want to throw up. It was the woman from the Lamborghini. The picture had been captured by some

paparazzo lowlife by the look of it; she could see the entrance to a restaurant in the background.

Josh, a dressing on his right temple, was looking wide-eyed at the media frenzy around him, the redhead wrapped around one of his arms, smiling for the cameras. The headline made her head pound. “Who is Ella’s new lover?”

She tossed it onto the sofa, unable to do anything save bury her face in her hands. She hadn’t run out of tears after all.

The tea was cold by the time she stopped, and she’d run out of tissues. As she hunted for more, a lone pen rolled out from under the sofa, along with a couple of pennies and more than a few balls of dusty fluff.

Cathy just sat there, watching them, the pressure in her sinuses mingling with the headache she already had. She picked up her phone and texted Josh.

“I’m sorry I hurt you. I didn’t mean what I said. It was the best year of my life. Take care of yourself. I love you. I really do. Cathy x”

Then she deleted it.

There was a second casting of the Charm. He was getting closer and running a terrible risk using it in a city; there were bound to be Arbiters picking up on the activity.

She put the kettle on and looked at the poster. Keep calm and–

There was a screech of tyres outside. She got a second mug out.

The communal door banged open after another flagrant use of a Charm. She heard heavy footsteps taking the stairs two at a time. The steam plumed from the spout and the kettle clicked off.

There was a hammering on the door, so loud it boomed through the flat. She poured the water onto the teabags as the Charm was used again and it flew open.

“Cat?” her brother shouted.

“I’m in the kitchen,” she replied, relieved he was alone. She squeezed out the teabags as he bombed down the hallway and appeared at the kitchen door. “Tea?”

“Cat.” He rushed over, threw his arms around her. He was bigger than she remembered, a military historian trapped in the body of an international rugby player. After almost crushing her to death he held her at arm’s length. “Is there anyone else here?” he asked and she shook her head. He looked so much older. His bright-blue eyes had dark circles beneath them and his wavy brown hair and sideburns worn longer than she recalled. “I’ve been looking everywhere for you…” He stopped, tears welling. “I’ve been so worried.”

She had no words. He searched her eyes, looking her over as if he couldn’t quite believe it was her.

“Did someone take you? Did someone put you up to it?”

“No.”

“Who helped you? Is there another family behind this?”

“No one. I did it by myself.”

“Of your own free will?”

She nodded, and got the milk out of the fridge to busy herself and mask her trembling.

“But why? God, Cathy, you’ve made our lives hell.”

“Whose lives?”

“All of us, blast it! Your family! What do you have to say for yourself?”

As she struggled to find something to say she looked at him properly. Tom had broadened in the shoulder and was quite handsome. His face had lost its boyish shape and he’d become a man since she last saw him. He was wearing a three-piece suit in a style very modern for the Nether. It looked

vintage in Mundanus but not as out of place as the sheathed sword hanging from his waist.

“It’s illegal to carry those here, you know that?”

“Bloody hell, Cat. Don’t you understand? I’ve been running all over the country looking for you. Mother has been in a state and Father…well.”

“I know,” she said. She’d intended to apologise, but the words just didn’t form. She went and closed the front door and came back to pour in the milk and stir the tea.

He took the mug she offered to him, barely even glancing at it. “How did you do it?”

“A Shadow Charm and lots of planning.” She was amazed at how calm she felt, almost like she was watching someone else’s life end. Perhaps it was the bliss of not anticipating the worst anymore; it was already happening.

“You look older.”

“Of course I do,” she replied. No doubt her mother would add that to the list of crimes she’d committed; no one aged in the Nether. Once a girl reached adulthood she was moved out of the nursery and into the Nether, rarely being allowed back into the real world, to protect her youth.

“It suits you.”

“Perhaps I’ll set a trend,” she muttered. “Your tea is getting cold.”

He shook his head. “You’ve no idea. Don’t you care?”

“You ask me that? You’re the only one I thought would understand.”

“I know it was hard for you.”

“Hard?” she laughed bitterly. “There’s an understatement.”

He looked down at the tea for the first time. She knew he was remembering all the times she’d hoped he would intervene, all the times she

hoped he would stop her father. He never did, but then neither did she. How could they have?

“You had it the worst, it’s true, but running away? Do you realise the amount of pressure we’ve been under? The lies we’ve had to tell to explain your absence?”

“I bet Father was more worried about the scandal than what could have happened to me.”

“You selfish, spoilt little bitch.”

Her mouth fell open. He’d never said anything harsh to her in his life.

“You didn’t stop and think for one minute what it would do to anyone else, did you?” He shook his head. “I thought you’d been kidnapped. I thought you were in Exilium at one point. I even thought you were dead. I couldn’t believe that you’d just disappear without telling me.”

She bit her lip. “I’m sorry, Tom.” Unable to look into his eyes, her attention drifted down to his hands. She blinked.

He looked down at the wedding ring. “That’s one of the things that happened whilst you were missing.”

“Who…”

“Lucy Californica-Papaver.”

“A Californica? I don’t understand.”

“It was to end the feud.”

“And to bring their money into the family, no doubt,” she added, but he remained silent. “An American. Do you like her?”

He waved the question away. “We haven’t been married for very long.”

“Were you given a choice?”

He gave her a long, hard stare. “Father had to tell everyone you were away in Switzerland at a finishing school. You had influenza and regrettably were unable to travel back for the wedding. Understand?”

She shut her eyes as the most awful thought crept in. With Tom now married she was next on the block. Elizabeth was the jewel of their generation. Her parents would be keen to make a good marriage for her, meaning they would dispose of the plain, troublesome middle child as quickly as possible.

“What?” Tom asked. She could feel her lips tingling as the blood rushed out of them.

“Lord Poppy said I was needed in Aquae Sulis,” she whispered, leaning against the worktop as her legs shook.

“You spoke to Lord Poppy?” Tom slammed the mug down. “When?”

“Two days ago. He lifted the Shadow Charm. That’s why you could find me.”

“Bloody hell, Cat! He said you were needed and you’re still here?”

She chewed a thumbnail. “I had things to do.”

His disgust was evident. “I don’t know whether to admire your bravery or be concerned for your sanity.”

“When’s the first ball of the season?”

“The day after tomorrow.”

“Not next week?”

“No. And stop stalling, Cathy, it’s time to go.”

“Lord Poppy said I needed to be back by then. Why? What’s going to happen?” He didn’t reply, instead gulping down the tea, so she took a guess. “Are they going to marry me off?”

“Father will talk to you when–”

“Shit!” He blanched at her outburst. “That’s it, isn’t it? Who is it?”

He groaned, rubbed his eyes like a man trying to wake up from his own nightmare. “Catherine. Stop thinking about yourself for just one moment and get your coat.”

“Who is it?”

Looking up at the ceiling in frustration, he dumped the mug and adjusted the scabbard. “William Reticulata-Iris. He got back from his Grand Tour yesterday. The engagement is to be announced at the ball.”

Cathy shook her head, backing away towards the door. She remembered the last time she saw William Iris. He was fourteen and too confident; she’d been an awkward twelve year-old forced into dancing with him at his request. He’d only done it to humiliate her. He was cocky, egotistical and as shallow as the rest of them. “No. No way! I’m not going to marry him. I’m not going to marry anyone!”

Tom held up his palms. “Cat, calm down. We can talk about it on the way home. You knew this would happen one day, it happens to all of us. I had to get married, we all have to do what’s best for the family, and the alliance with the Irises is critical.”

“Fuck the Irises!” she shrieked and his pale cheeks flushed crimson.

“You’ve been in Mundanus for too long,” he said with a grimace. “Now pull yourself together and stop this nonsense. You’ve had your fun, now you have to face your–”

“You sound like our bloody father!” she yelled. “This wasn’t just having some fun, I made a life of my own!” Just three days before her life had been an open vista of possibilities. She had choices, from what to do with her life down to when she made a cup of tea and what she ate for lunch. All of them, large and small, were telescoping into a dark tunnel leading to a life she couldn’t bear, a life of quiet servitude and fitting in, of performing for society’s expectations in public and behind closed doors much worse, accepted as part of wifely duty. “I can’t live like they do.”

“I’ve had enough of this.” Tom reached for her hand, which she snapped out of his range.

She darted into the hallway. “I’m not going to be married off like some–”

“You are a Rhoeas-Papaver, one of the Great Families, and you will come back to Aquae Sulis with me now.” Tom was looking angry. She’d never seen that before.

“No, I–”

Before she realised what was happening, he’d lunged at her, banging his shoulder into her stomach and flipping her over into a fireman’s lift. His arms wrapped around her legs and he headed for the door.

“My stuff!” she yelled.

“You don’t need any of it at home,” he replied.

“You can’t do this!” she said, pummelling his back with her fists, furious at being handled like a troublesome child. Why did he have to be so big? “This is kidnapping.”

“This is the way it’s going to be, Catherine,” he said, opening the door and checking no one else was coming out of their flat at the same time. “And don’t even think about screaming,” he added, as she sucked in a deep breath to do so. “I have other Charms at my disposal that you do not want me to use.”

That kept her quiet as he descended the stairs. It was too humiliating for words. Her fury made it hard for her to think about anything but clobbering him over the head at the first opportunity and making a run for it.

“Now,” he said, hand on the handle of the communal front door. “Do I need to lock you in the boot of the car?”

“No,” she said quietly, thinking that if he put her down by the car, she could sprint away and call for help.

“And Catherine,” he added, turning the handle. “If you do anything except get in the car and put your seatbelt on without saying a word, I will

use a Doll Charm on you."

She thought she was going to be sick. She'd heard rumours of that Charm, one of the least acceptable in Society; it rendered the victim powerless over their body but still aware. The victim could be frozen rigid or kept pliable like a rag doll. Either way it would make escape impossible and he'd have to carry her into the family house utterly helpless. It would be obvious that she'd resisted him.

"I understand," she whispered, cowed.

He dumped her by the side of a black VW Golf, too modern to belong to the family. She saw the hire-car information on the passenger seat as he unlocked the door for her. It took several goes; he was briefly befuddled by the buttons on the keychain remote, and he held her arm with his other hand as he muttered in frustration.

He opened the door for her and pushed her inside. She sat on top of the bits of paper, realising that this was it, she was leaving Manchester, kidnapped by her own brother.

"Seatbelt," he ordered and she clicked it into place. The thought of seeing her parents by the end of that very day made her throat tight. Cathy tugged down her sleeves, twisting the cuffs as the panic surged through her, unravelling her ability to do anything except shake violently.

The door was slammed shut and he marched around to the driver's side, looking up and down the street nervously. She was amazed no Arbiters had appeared. Perhaps they weren't as scary as she'd been led to believe.

"Can't I just get my bag?" she asked as he got in and put on his seatbelt.

"No."

Just one minute would be enough time to grab her phone and hide it somewhere useful later on. "But I have things I need in–"

“Don’t you understand, Cat?” He twisted in his seat to face her. “It doesn’t matter any more. It’s over.”

He stalled the car as he tried to pull away and she sank in the seat. Could she bolt at a service station? She sighed at herself. Lord Poppy wasn’t going to forget about her, even if she did manage to get away from Tom.

“I’ll never forgive you for this,” she said, watching her street disappear in the wing mirror.

“As you’ll soon discover, sometimes we have to do things we don’t want to,” he replied, tapping the sat nav. She noticed his hands were shaking. This had been hard for him too. He was just as trapped as she was.

“We could make a plan, Tom, if we worked together–”

“Stop it!” he shouted and hit the steering wheel with the palm of his hand. “Just…just accept it and start working out what you’re going to say to Father, not how you can get out of this. Whether you like it or not, whether you hate us or not, you will be engaged to William, you will do your duty, you will marry him, and you will live in the Nether and that is that.”

She turned away, curling up her legs and looking out at the city and its traffic. She felt her heartbeat pounding in her temples, her stomach knotted. She still had a wish to make and the only thing she wanted she wasn’t permitted.

It was hard not to think about giving up.

Soon they were leaving the redbrick urban sprawl behind and the view opened out onto green fields and occasional farmhouses.

“When will we be there?” she asked.

“After dark.”

“Why don’t you take the motorway if it’s such a rush?”

“I don’t like driving on them. Everyone drives too fast.”

She faced forwards and noticed how slow he was driving. “You know we can go up to sixty on this road?”

“I’ll go at the speed I want to,” he replied, arms held rigidly straight at the wheel.

“What’s Lucy like?” she asked, hating the atmosphere, bored with the questions and worries battering her skull.

“Clever. Funny. She has good taste.”

“You like her then?”

He shifted uncomfortably. “I was relieved she wasn’t like her parents.”

Cathy smiled. Poor Tom, utterly incapable of talking about how he felt. “I’m sorry,” she said, the guilt welling again. “I missed you. I thought about you all the time.”

“I just can’t believe you did it by yourself. I thought I was going to have to fight off kidnappers and rescue you.”

“But you turned out to be the kidnapper,” she said and then clamped her mouth shut. “Sorry, that came out wrong.”

“It just came out,” he corrected. “It was exactly what you were thinking. I see you’ve lost your good manners and the ability to keep your thoughts to yourself.”

She kept her mouth shut, trying to disprove him.

“What did you think you’d find in Mundanus?”

“I already found it,” she said. “Freedom.” And love, she thought, but didn’t dare mention anything to do with Josh.

“But what did you want to actually do there?”

She fiddled with a cuff again, uncertain whether to tell the truth. It wasn’t that she didn’t trust Tom. She was worried he’d laugh at her. Her mouth twitched into a smile at the memory of when Josh had coaxed it out of her. He’d asked a few times at the end of a film and she’d brushed the

question off, finding it hard to undo a lifetime of hiding her ambition from everyone around her. Then he tickled her until she'd fallen off the sofa but she still refused to tell him. He sat back and with a terrible sadness in his eyes said, "If you don't feel safe to tell me, that's OK."

That was the first moment she wondered if she was falling in love with him. She sat back on the sofa, tucked her toes under his leg and took a deep breath. "For the first few months away from my family I thought about opening a bookshop with an open fire and comfy chairs and free tea."

"Sounds good. Only sci-fi books?"

"Maybe. Lately I've had another idea…but I don't know if I could do it."

He smiled, rested a hand on her knee. "What did Doc Brown say?"

She grinned. "'If you put your mind to it, you can accomplish anything.' OK. Promise not to laugh?"

"I promise."

"I want to do something in human rights. I want to protect people who don't have a voice."

He nodded. "Cool."

She searched for any hint of scorn, any impending jibes, but there was nothing except a gentle smile. "Josh," she said, leaning closer. "I…I think I l–."

"Did you hear me, Cat?" Tom called. "What did you want to do in Mundanus?"

She blinked. "I wasn't sure yet." She swallowed the lump in her throat and looked out over the fields.

"Did you really want to stay in Mundanus forever?" he asked after a few minutes.

"Yeah," she said wistfully.

“Even though you’d get old?”

“Oh, for God’s sake, there’s more to life than worrying about bloody wrinkles, you know.”

He winced. “Don’t speak like that once you get back to Aquae Sulis. They’ll pick you up on every little thing.”

“Didn’t they always?”

He nodded. “You’ll just have to make the best of it. William’s family are very wealthy and very powerful. It’s a very good match. You’ll want for nothing.”

“Except freedom, some basic human rights, the ability to own my own property – because that’s all I’ll be: property.”

“Cat.”

She closed her eyes, overwhelmed. If she’d had an off button, she’d press it now. She was too tired to think straight and too wired to sleep.

The car’s brakes squealed and she was thrown against her seatbelt. When she opened her eyes, she saw a car blocking the road ahead, a black vintage Bentley with a driver in goggles and leather driving gloves still behind the wheel. A young man in his early twenties was leaning against it, slapping his paired kid gloves against the palm of one hand.

He was dressed as if he’d stepped out of a shooting weekend in the Twenties. He too was wearing a very out-of-place sword.

“A Rosa,” Tom said. “Fool, what does he think he’s playing at?”

The buttonhole was the main clue: a gorgeous deep-red rose. He had a handsome face but an unfortunately large nose, dark hair scraped back and an arrogant tilt of the chin.

Tom brought the car to a stop in a narrow layby. “Stay in the car,” he said and got out. Cathy pulled up the handbrake before it could roll

backwards and got out to join Tom, who clicked his tongue in irritation but carried on.

“I say, what on earth do you think you’re doing?” he said, striding up to the man. “You could have caused an accident.”

“Thomas Rhoeas-Papaver?”

“I am,” Tom replied, a foot taller than the source of his irritation. “And who might you be?”

“Horatio Gallica-Rosa,” he said with a slight bow. “And you must be the elusive Catherine Rhoeas-Papaver, so famously being schooled in Switzerland.” His eyes ran up and down her jeans and hooded top. “Is that the fashion over there?”

Catherine took Tom’s advice to not speak her thoughts; there were far too many expletives. Something about the way Horatio looked at her got her hackles up. She decided to clean the rust off her old skills.

“Mr Gallica-Rosa,” she said, with a small curtsy that felt ridiculous in jeans and trainers. “Good day to you. Has your car broken down? Do you require assistance?” The words felt so wrong, like someone else was speaking them.

“All manners now, I see,” he replied petulantly, resting his left hand on the pommel of his sheathed sword. “Pity they weren’t in evidence yesterday.”

She frowned. “I’m sorry, I don’t understand.”

“Don’t play the coquette with me, Miss Papaver.” He sighed at her blank stare. “The wish magic you cast, you foolish girl. Your meddling prevented the delivery of a mundane that was promised to me by Lady Rose.”

“How dare you speak to my sister in this manner,” Tom said as Cathy tried her best to link either of the wishes to Lady Rose. Between the sleep-

deprivation, background dread and rising anger at having been called a “foolish girl” there was little left for deduction.

“Which mundane?” she asked, resting a hand on Tom’s arm.

“Ella Jacobs, the film star. The woman currently cavorting around Londinium with a veritable brown-paper bag of a mundane who was never destined to meet her.”

The Guccified redhead, Cathy realised. “Lady Rose promised *her* to you? A mundane? Wouldn’t the Arbiters have something to say about something that dodgy?”

She heard a tiny groan from Tom and realised she’d stopped thinking about how to speak.

The Rosa tutted. “That is irrelevant. What is of the utmost relevance, however, is how your trickery, and quite frankly disgusting thoughtlessness, has resulted in depriving me of one of the most alluring beauties of this mundane generation.” As he spoke, he took a step towards Tom. “In accordance with the rights of my birth, and with the approval of Lady Rose, I demand satisfaction.” He looked up at Tom, who was turning that awful shade of scarlet again. “And I assume, that as Miss Papaver’s only brother – and may I offer my deepest condolences to you for such a difficult burden – you will be the one to give it.”

12

Max had no idea he'd slept late until he looked at his watch. It was mid-afternoon and the room was dark; all houses in the Nether had heavy curtains to compensate for a lack of discernible night time. He ached. It was too dark to see the gargoyle but he knew it was in the corner nearest the door, just like he knew his fingers were cold and his leg hurt like hell. He pulled the cord by the side of the bed to summon help.

Axon was proving to be an excellent nurse and helped him get into a presentable and mobile state. He gave Max leather gloves to protect his hands whilst using the crutches and another shot of morphine. Axon didn't ask stupid questions or make accusations either. All the while, the gargoyle watched, its scowl demonic.

"I'll serve a luncheon of cold meats in the dining room, when you're ready to eat," Axon said and left.

"We need to talk," the gargoyle said, clunking over to sit between the bed and the door.

"I'm hungry." Max hoped that a full belly would help with the lightheaded fuzziness the morphine had caused.

"We can't just ignore what's happened in London," said the gargoyle, coming closer. "Our first duty is to protect innocents, and they're not being protected there. It's up to us to step in."

"The Chapter is gone. Without the Chapter Master, Mr Ekstrand is my direct boss now. What he says, we do."

“My stone arse!” The gargoyle sat back on its haunches, its face level with Max. “He’s obviously a few sandwiches short of a picnic and he doesn’t know what it’s like out in the field. We do.”

Max shook his head. “Disobeying a Sorcerer is not the most sensible course of action.”

“I’m not saying we go and stick our fingers up at him and catch the first train back to London, I’m saying we can’t just shrug and forget about it.”

“I don’t plan to do that. I’m going to ask him more about the Chapter, now I’m feeling better. I wasn’t at my best last night either. And we can’t rush into anything with the London problem; we don’t know how high the corruption goes, or how widespread it is. Montgomery and Faulkner now are connected to the Camden Chapter. Are only Faulkner and the one who shot me corrupt? Is it all of that Chapter’s Arbiters except for Montgomery? Is it the Chapter Master?”

“I was thinking about this whilst you were asleep,” the gargoyle said. “We need to find out if that kind of corruption is in other places.”

“But how? Even if we ignored the fact that we’d be breaking territorial rules, we have no support staff or liaison teams to flag up anything for us to look into. In London we’re blind.”

“True,” the gargoyle said. “What I don’t understand is why he isn’t hopping up and down spitting for blood after all his Arbiters, bar us, were murdered. Why isn’t he banging on the door of the Camden Chapter, or the Sorcerer of Essex?”

There was a knock on the door before Max could reply and Axon came back in. “Mr Ekstrand has asked for the gargoyle.”

“What does he want with me?” The gargoyle sounded nervous.

“I have no idea,” Axon replied and stood aside, gesturing for the gargoyle to leave. “Would you like to have lunch now?” he asked Max, who

nodded.

He ate alone in a dining room with walls covered in landscape paintings whilst considering his options. It didn't take long. The food was simple and tasted good. Cold cuts with salad seemed to be just what he could manage. Axon had arranged a chair and cushion for his leg and the woolly feeling in his head slowly improved until he felt ready to talk to Ekstrand.

He made his slow and tiring way into the hall and heard the Sorcerer's voice.

"Good afternoon. How are you?"

"I'm very well, thank you, how are you?" That was Petra.

There was a long pause. "I'm not sure what to say," the Sorcerer eventually replied.

"Generally, 'I'm fine, thank you' will suffice."

"Even if I don't feel fine?"

"It depends on who the person is; whether you're addressing an acquaintance or someone you know well."

Max went to the door and saw Petra stand up as Mr Ekstrand hurried to the other side of the room. He was dressed in a casual lounge suit and woollen waistcoat. She was wearing another curve-hugging suit. Unlike the night before, Max felt indifferent about it.

"Good afternoon," Mr Ekstrand said to Petra, taking hesitant strides towards her with an outstretched hand. "How are you?"

Max cleared his throat.

"Ah!" Ekstrand beamed at him, none of the suspicion from the day before in evidence. "Maximilian, how are you? Do come in."

"You look better than yesterday," Petra said, helping him onto the sofa and placing cushions behind his back.

“I slept well.” Max watched Ekstrand sit opposite him with a fixed smile on his face. “Is everything all right?”

“Yes, I am fine, thank you.” Ekstrand spoke like a poor actor in a play. “I imagine you’re wondering about the gargoyle. I’ve prepared it for fieldwork and we had a very interesting conversation about hospitals. It’s in my laboratory whilst the modifications settle.”

“Good,” Max said, deciding not to concern himself with the change in the Sorcerer’s behaviour; it seemed to have made him more useful.

“Now that you’re up and about, I need you to get this investigation underway.”

“Mr Ekstrand, Max can’t even walk yet!” Petra said, sitting down nearby with her notebook and pen.

“He can with those,” Ekstrand flapped a hand at the crutches. “Besides, we don’t have time to waste; the season is about to start and I need to know what’s going on with the Master of Ceremonies.”

“Lavandula?” Max said. “He’s the one who’s gone missing?”

“Indeed,” Ekstrand said, his focus interrupted by a flash of delight at seeing tea being carried in. “Axon, you read my mind. Earl Grey?”

“Of course, sir,” Axon replied and served the tea discreetly as Ekstrand continued.

“Lavandula is arguably one of the most cooperative Fae-touched within the boundaries of the Heptarchy.” Ekstrand took his cup and breathed in the ribbon of steam. “Earl Grey is the most superior of all teas, I find, don’t you?”

He glanced at Petra as he said it, as if looking for approval. She rewarded him with a nod and he turned back to Max. “Mr Lavandula always informed me of any new Nether properties in Aquae Sulis, and the families involved. It’s far more civilised than the way things are in

Londinium and Oxenford. And now he's disappeared. I need him back." He frowned into the bottom of his teacup. "I don't like change."

"Do you suspect foul play?"

"Absolutely. Why would the Master of Ceremonies leave two days before the start of the season without telling me?"

"Perhaps he had a personal emergency," Max said.

"If he did, then I should know about it." Ekstrand sipped the tea. "Personal or not, any emergency that calls him away without so much as a polite letter is my business too. Besides, he understands the importance of doing things properly so he would have sent a messenger. Something is wrong, and I don't want to be forced to get used to a new Master of Ceremonies when I've just become accustomed to this one."

"And there's the data from the other night," Petra said, and Ekstrand set his cup down.

"Indeed!" He looked up at the ceiling, and then that odd fixed smile was back on his face again. "Would you like to see the monitoring chamber?"

"All right," Max said, noticing the way Ekstrand looked to Petra for approval again. She gave him a little smile, which pleased the Sorcerer immensely.

Once Max was up and the crutches in position, he followed the Sorcerer out of the sitting room and down the corridor, along a wing of the house he hadn't yet visited. The first few doors were painted white and were the same as any period house in the Nether or Mundanus. But the further down the corridor they went, the less conventional they were. One was covered in writing that had been painted on with something sparkling like starlight. Another was made of a smoky crystal slab, replete with the occasional flaw. The one Ekstrand stopped in front of looked more like a pressurised door

from a submarine, made of riveted metal and with a small wheel instead of a handle.

“This is one of my favourite rooms,” he said. “It’s also top secret.”

“I understand, sir,” Max said, wondering why he was being brought into the Sorcerer’s confidence when, only the day before, Ekstrand had been reluctant to even talk to him.

Ekstrand twirled the wheel, the door hissed and opened inwards. Max took care with the crutches to get over the lip of metal, not seeing all of the machinery until he was inside. The room was large, comparable to the generously sized living room, but felt cramped, filled with pipes, wires, dials and all manner of machinery that made no sense to Max.

At the centre of the far wall was a large drum of paper and several mechanical arms tipped with miniature brass model hands holding quills connected to individual ink reserves. They were moving independently, leaving ink trails on the paper as it turned on the drum.

“This took me years to build and refine,” Ekstrand said as he patted his pockets. “I read about something called a seismograph and it inspired me to adapt the idea for my own purposes. None of the other Sorcerers have one.” He turned back to Max. “That’s because their understanding of the sorcerous arts is inferior.”

“What does it measure?” Max asked, hobbling closer to the drum as Ekstrand located his spectacles.

“Nether entrance and egress in the city of Bath. Isn’t it beautiful?”

Max was indifferent. “You know when the Fae-touched go in and out of Aquae Sulis?”

Ekstrand nodded, grinning. “And their staff. Whenever they open a Way, the sensors I have all over the city detect the activity and convey the information here. The only drawback is having to have extra coal brought in

to feed the boiler. Petra tried to make me read a book about something called electronics that she believes would be more efficient, but I don't like that idea. For one thing, it would need electricity, which is vulgar. For another, I simply cannot put my trust in a machine without visible cogs, gears and levers. Who knows what 'electronics' might really be doing?"

Max, assuming the question was rhetorical, moved closer to the drum. "I always wondered how the Chapter Master knew so quickly when there was increased activity in certain areas."

Ekstrand nodded. "Axon keeps an eye on it, and sometimes the others too, but only on Saturdays. Obviously."

"Others?" Max asked, but Ekstrand had moved on and was rummaging in a box of paper by the side of the drum.

"Here it is," he said, holding up a section of paper. "See here, this is what it looks like when a Fae-touched or one of their servants opens a Way in the normal fashion."

He pointed at one of the lines that wobbled no more than half an inch away from its normal trajectory. Max looked back up at the drum and saw a similar wobble being produced by one of the quills and then another. "It's busy today."

"Yes, the season begins tomorrow, so they're all running around like idiots. Now look at this." He unfurled the paper a little more, revealing a huge block of black ink. "Know what that is?"

Max shook his head.

"That is someone opening a Way that is locked, using incredible force to do so."

"A break-in?"

"Exactly."

"At Lavandula's house?"

“Yes. Petra did some calculations. But look at how long it was being held open.”

Max inspected the paper, realising that the lines marked time as well as location. “It seems much longer than all the others.”

“Someone broke into his Nether house from Mundanus, held the Way open and then left again.”

“I can’t imagine another one of the puppets being strong enough to break his lock,” Max said.

“They’re not. He had the best protection Charms in the city.”

“Not one of the Fae?” Max said.

“I think it’s very possible, which is why you’re going there now to see what you can find. If the Fae Court is meddling with key people in Aquae Sulis, nothing good is going to come of it.”

“I agree, sir. May I ask a question?” At Ekstrand’s nod he said, “Regarding the loss of the Chapter, sir…it must be connected to the corruption in London.”

“I’m making preparations to look inside the Cloister. I don’t want to rush into anything reckless.”

“That’s excellent news, sir. May I have permission to go and see what happened there, and to ask Axon to monitor the London press for any signs of–”

Ekstrand held up his hand. “London? Are you still determined to go back there?”

“Not physically, sir, I’m not very useful, and it’s clear that’s a hostile territory now, but I do think it has to be followed up.”

“If there’s corruption within one or possibly more north London Chapters, it becomes a matter for the Heptarchy. All of Albion’s Sorcerers

need to be contacted and a Moot called. It takes a dreadfully long time to do that."

"But if you told them why, surely they'd meet quickly?"

"I can't disclose the reason for the meeting unless all are present."

"In case the Sorcerer of Essex is the source of the corruption?"

Ekstrand laughed as if Max had told a brilliant joke, then stopped when he realised that an Arbiter would never do such a thing. "Nonsense. Because Dante is likely to take terrible offence if I so much as hint that there's a problem in his Kingdom, and that would cause another war. Much better to embarrass him in front of all the other Sorcerers, then they'll back me up when I demand an explanation."

"How long will it take?"

"Not long. A few weeks maybe."

"The innocents are being taken now, sir. We don't have a few weeks."

"I can't help the fact it will take time to open a proper dialogue; there are protocols to be followed, it's a sensitive business getting in touch with a Sorcerer, let alone to make everyone aware something's gone rotten in his territory. If we progress an investigation without informing him, it would be a terrible breach of sovereignty, not to mention appalling manners. We can use the time to determine what exactly happened to the Chapter; it may well give us more to take to the Moot about what the Camden Chapter has been up to. Besides, there's no guarantee the loss of the Chapter and the corruption in London are connected. Just because they appear to be doesn't mean they are. It could be that an experiment went catastrophically wrong and killed everyone in the cloister."

"I'll go now and see what happened," Max offered, all too aware they didn't have enough information.

“No, you don’t understand. I can’t just send you in there and I can’t scry because the equipment in the cloister has been damaged. The anchor property is still intact, so there are no structural concerns, but whatever destroyed the soul vessels may still be active. It may be that the individuals responsible are waiting for you, especially if this was an effort to cover up your reports of corruption.”

Max nodded, now seeing the problem. Ekstrand was being sensible. The buildings the Fae-touched lived in and Ekstrand’s house depended on the existence of physical buildings in Mundanus. The properties in the Nether, like the one he stood in now, were reflections of the real buildings, bound by magical anchors that only Sorcerers and the Fae themselves knew how to create.

Nether buildings were stable and structurally safe as long as the Mundane anchor building remained so, and it meant maintaining the Nether property was effortless – all bound magically within the anchors. The fact the cloister was still intact gave hope for restoring a functional Chapter in the future, but there had still been a breach in security that couldn’t be forgotten.

“How could an attacker have got inside?” he wondered aloud.

“They may have already been there,” Ekstrand replied. “There are too many questions and not enough facts. I’ll establish a new way to scry. It simply takes time to reduce risk, that’s all.”

Max nodded slowly, knowing he had to be patient. “May I be there when you first look?”

“Indeed, I’ll summon you.”

“I’ll look into the disappearance of the Master of Ceremonies in the meantime,” Max said, satisfied that something was being done, even if none of it seemed fast enough.

“Excellent.” Ekstrand tossed the evidence back into the box. “And may I say, it’s been a pleasure talking with you today,” he added, in that poor actor tone. “I do hope you have a…pleasant journey.” He took off his spectacles, looking dissatisfied. “Do come again!” He shook his head as he tucked the glasses back into his jacket pocket. “It’s so difficult,” he muttered and ushered Max out.

Cathy stepped in front of Tom before he could reply. “He will not give you this satisfaction!”

“Catherine,” Tom growled, his hand on her shoulder.

The Rosa’s eyes widened in genuine shock. “How dare you behave in such a reprehensible manner! Have you no respect for the way things should be done? I have taken the trouble to find your brother to answer for your misdemeanour, pray do me the courtesy of stepping back and allowing your honour to be defended appropriately.”

“But it’s not even necessary!” she said as Tom succeeded in shoving her aside.

“What evidence do you have for this accusation, sir?” he asked the Rosa.

“Only confirmation from Lady Rose herself.” His smug expression made his nose appear even larger. “When I saw what happened last night in Londinium I appealed to the Rosa Patroon, who intervened on my behalf. I’m given to understand that Lord Poppy himself approached Lady Rose to explain this bizarre turn of events, and confirmed your sister made the offending wish.”

Tom turned to her, his mouth opening and closing and eyes wide like a goldfish tipped from his bowl. “What on earth?”

“It seems your family has very little awareness of your sister’s actions,” the Rosa added, now building himself up to a full-blown gloat.

“This is ridiculous,” Cathy said. “Not only is it offensive–”

Tom yanked her away from the Rosa, who was starting to chuckle. “Don’t make this any worse,” he hissed, turning his back on the accuser and blocking his view of Cathy. “Is what he said true?”

Cathy wanted to push past Tom and argue for herself, but he saw her intent and held onto her arms. “Catherine, I swear, if you don’t explain yourself right now–”

“I made the wish,” she said, trying to wriggle out of his grip. She had planned to keep all that to herself, not wanting Tom, and eventually the rest of the family, to know about her failures to date. “Lord Poppy forced them on me, I was trying to sort it all out when you came and–”

“So his accusation stands?” Tom’s cheeks blazed but his lips were white.

“Sort of. I didn’t do it intentionally.”

“When this mess is sorted out, you and I are going to have a frank and honest conversation.”

“Fine, but Tom, you don’t need to fight. It’s absurd.”

“He has called me out,” Tom whispered. “Now I cannot do anything but accept, or risk damaging our family’s reputation even further. Now stay here, and for goodness’ sake don’t speak a word.”

He turned back to the Rosa, who had lit a cigarette and was leaning against the car again, smiling as if he were watching a comedy play out on a stage. “Straightened it all out?” he asked.

Tom cleared his throat as Cathy forced herself to think like one of them again. Something about this seemed wrong, but she couldn’t work out why.

“Have you a second sir?” Tom asked, implicitly accepting the challenge.

“I have indeed. Name yours, sir, and they will set about making the arrangements.”

“I counter your accusation with one of my own!” The words had flown out of Cathy’s mouth before she had fully decided what she was going to say. As fast as she could recall the case, the words tumbled from her mouth in the formal style she hadn’t spoken for years, before either of the men could silence her. “I hold that I did not directly cause the offence, and I do not benefit from the offence, therefore I place responsibility for your grievance onto the soul of the party who directly benefits: Mr Joshua Collins, mundane, unaffiliated to any of the Great Families.”

The Rosa tossed his cigarette away. “Is there precedent?”

“Oh, yes,” she said, fearing that Tom was about to suffer an aneurysm. “Lady Rose would know of it, as would my patron. In fact any of the Fae Court would know of the dispute between Lady Wisteria’s favourite and the head of the Lavandula family in 1657. The latter argued that as he did not directly benefit from the effects of a miscast spell, responsibility for the grievance fell upon the actual benefactor, a mundane by the name of Wokingham, who bedded the milkmaid who’d been accidentally hit by the Beautifying Charm.”

The Rosa considered this as Tom stared at her. “So be it.” He bowed. “I’m not so boorish as to maintain a dispute with the wrong party. Consider my challenge withdrawn, Mr Papaver.”

Tom breathed out in relief and shook the Rosa’s hand. “I shall consider this conversation between us forgotten,” he said.

“I think this meeting will be difficult to forget,” Horatio replied, glancing pointedly at Cathy. “I will seek out this bland benefactor ‘Collins’ and call him out in a manner he will understand. Good day to you.”

Cathy’s heart fell into her trainers. “You’re not going to challenge him, are you?”

“I have not received satisfaction,” Horatio replied, pulling his gloves back on and walking round to the passenger seat as the driver adjusted his goggles. “Therefore I will obtain it from him.”

“But he’s a mundane!”

Horatio laughed. “It makes no difference to me. Makes it easier in fact, less political fallout.” He glanced at Tom. “Wouldn’t you agree? One less mundane in the world is hardly something worth our concern. Good day.”

Tom returned his bow and they watched him climb into the car. When it was out of sight, Cathy pulled Tom towards the VW. “Come on! We have to get to London before he does, that’s where Josh is!”

“Just wait one damn minute, Cat,” Tom said, twisting himself free. “You owe me an explanation. What are these wishes that Lord Poppy gave you? Why didn’t you mention them before?”

“There’s no time for that now, you heard him, he’s going to kill Josh! We can’t let that happen.”

“Why would I drive to London when we’re required in Aquae Sulis post haste? I’ve never heard of this Collins, I have no idea who he is and frankly do not care to discover.”

“But it’s my fault he got mixed up in this!”

“And how did that happen?”

Cathy looked up at the sky. “He was my boyfriend.”

She didn’t look back at him for a few beats, but when the silence persisted, she finally did. His face was covered by both hands.

“I don’t know where to start,” he said, dragging his hands down slowly, stretching his face into a horrible expression. “Before we get any further, are there any other horrendous secrets you’re keeping from me?”

“No. Can you shout at me in the car please?”

“I take it a ‘boyfriend’ is the mundane equivalent of courting a young man without parental permission?” he asked, arms folded, resolutely still.

“Yes. And I know what you’re worried about so why don’t you just come out with it?”

Tom looked away, deeply embarrassed. “This is an absolute nightmare.”

Cathy rolled her eyes. “You’re only upset because you think Josh and I slept together, right?”

“How could you have become so crass so soon?”

“We didn’t.”

His eyebrows shot up. “A mundane with traditional values? I find that hard to believe.”

“No, it was the bloody curse.” This time it was she who hid her face with her hands. She rubbed her skin, wanting to wake up out of the same nightmare as her brother. “Look, when I went up to Cambridge, you didn’t think Father trusted the chaperone and the minder, did you? He put a curse on me, to make sure I didn’t lose my market value.”

“Catherine! What a way to speak of your own purity.”

“Oh, please. I’m not stupid, that’s what it comes down to, isn’t it? Have to guarantee the goods are pure and unsullied when selling them off to the highest bidder.”

Tom didn’t have an argument to put forward against the truth, no matter how crass it sounded. “Father told you he’d cursed you?”

“No. I managed to get away from the minder and hide in Manchester but I didn’t find a way to break the curse.”

“How did you find out about it?”

She blushed. “You really want to know?”

“Not really, but I feel I must.”

“Every time I…whenever I…if I had those kinds of intentions near a man…Oh, God. Can’t you just take my word for it?”

“I have to know whether our family has an even worse problem than I thought.”

“If I tried to take my clothes off near a man, with the intention of… being close to him, they would put themselves back on again. I couldn’t even unbutton my shirt or take off my shoe if that was what I was planning to do.”

He looked appalled. “So you only discovered this curse because you tried to…” he cleared his throat, “sleep with this Collins man?”

She nodded, her blush competing with his.

“I don’t know what to say. Of all the things I’ve thought of you, Catherine, I never thought you’d have such low moral standards and loose virtue.”

“Oh, give me a break, it’s different in Mundanus. If anyone should be offended it’s me! I have every right to do what I like with my body!”

“I refer you to my earlier comments regarding your selfishness,” he said stiffly. “I’m relieved Father had the foresight to take these measures. It’s been proven that you didn’t deserve his trust at all.”

She forced herself to breathe out slowly. “It’s a different world, and anyway, this doesn’t change the fact that we need to go to London and save Josh.”

“You want me to go against Father’s express wishes so we can save a mundane man who sought to deflower you?”

She was about to argue more, but realised it wasn’t the time. “I want you to help me save an innocent man who doesn’t deserve to be murdered because I am such a bloody idiot, OK? I want you to be the kind of brother

who wouldn’t want that either. If he dies, I won’t be able to live with the guilt.”

He glanced at the car. “I don’t know how fast we can get there.”

“Let me drive,” she said, holding out her hand. “I passed my test, don’t worry.”

He dropped the key onto her palm. “I can’t believe I’m doing this. We need to leave London as soon as we can when this is done.”

“I know,” she said, running over to the car.

“And if I think, for one moment you’re planning some kind of elaborate escape–”

“I know, Barbie time,” she said, adjusting the seat and mirror as he clicked his seatbelt in place with a confused expression. “Now don’t freak out. I’m going to give it some wellie.”

“I don’t even understand what you mean,” he muttered as she revved the engine, working out the clutch point.

Then she floored it, and he didn’t say a word for the rest of the trip.

13

Cathy cautiously pushed open the door of the Emporium of Things in Between and Besides and peeped in to check for other customers. There were none.

The bell tinkled above her and the Shopkeeper looked up from his book.

“Catherine!”

She went in, defensive. “Hello.”

“I’m so glad you’re back.”

“I’m not here to work for you.”

He gave her a sad look, tucked his bookmark into place and closed the book. “Not for that reason. I wanted to explain before; I didn’t tell Lord Poppy you’d be here, but you didn’t give me a chance.”

“Really?” She always found it so hard to tell whether people were telling the truth.

“Really, Catherine. I’m amazed you think I’d do that. Is your regard for my discretion so poor?”

She bit her lip. “Not many people would tell a Fae Lord to get lost.”

“That’s true, and why I could not. But he worked out where you were all by himself. I have no idea how. He told me to make sure you didn’t guess he was there. I had to obey.”

“OK,” she said. “I’m sorry I was horrible to you. I was upset.”

“Understandably.”

“And everything is all bug…is falling apart and I need your help. A Rosa is on the way to London to kill a mundane, and it’s my fault.”

The Shopkeeper came out from behind the counter, too intrigued to remember to take off his glasses. “Are you certain?”

She nodded. “He told us. He was totally chilled out about it.”

“Chilled?”

She sighed. “He didn’t give the impression he was concerned about murdering a mundane.” Speech in the Nether was so long-winded.

“I know the Rosa family is arrogant, and is powerful in Londinium, but even so…there are still Arbiters to consider, even if one is unconcerned by moral issues.”

“It’s Horatio Gallica-Rosa. Is he good with a sword?”

“Only the best in Londinium, arguably Albion. The only other young blood I’d consider his equal is Nathaniel Reticulata-Iris. It’s just as well they live so far apart.”

“Bollocks,” Cathy muttered. “Look, I reckon I’ve got an hour at the most to make sure he fails. What’ve you got that could help?”

“You want to use a Charm on a member of the Rosa family? They’d find out, you know, it would make things worse.”

“What about one I could cast on Josh, the mundane, to protect him?”

The shopkeeper rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “I don’t need to counsel you against using a Charm in Mundanus, do I?”

“I know the risks. I don’t have much time. Tom is waiting outside.”

“He found you then?”

She nodded, not wanting to go there. “Please, anything. I’ll owe you.”

“It would have to be strong, but subtle,” he murmured, his grey eyes scanning the shelves. “Fast-acting and short-lived, to ensure it couldn’t be identified and traced back to you…”

Cathy bounced on her heels, aware of time slipping away. If she stepped out of the Nether outside the shop, they’d be in Smithfields. She had no

idea where Josh was, but Tom said he had a couple of Seeker Charms left that she could use when the time came.

“I have it!” the Shopkeeper said, dragging over the wheeled stepladder. “A Luck Charm, one that’s very potent with a tight localised effect. It’s very easy to cast, just a matter of ensuring contact with the individual who needs the luck.” He climbed up to one of the higher shelves, rummaged amongst the boxes and came back down to her holding a plain wooden tube.

He unscrewed the top. She expected a telescope to slide out of it, but instead something more like a small egg dropped into his palm. He showed it to her. “It is as it looks,” he said. “The shell is very fragile, it breaks easily on contact, so you don’t have to hit him too hard with it. Speak his name on contact, so all the luck goes to him.”

“Will it leave a mark though?”

“It’s white for a few moments, then disappears, so you’d better time it well. Apply just before the Rosa attacks; the mundane will have anywhere between five to ten minutes of extraordinary good luck, then he’s on his own. It’s impossible to trace to you.”

“But they could trace it here,” she said, watching him carefully wrap the egg in tissue paper.

“As I have had occasion to explain many times in the past, I simply sell the goods, I do not choose what to do with them. And I never disclose what I sell to whom.”

She took the wrapped egg and kissed him on the cheek. “Thank you. I’ll come back when I can, OK?”

He didn’t reply, just brushed his cheek with his fingertips as she dashed out of the door.

Half an hour later, Cathy and Tom were chasing a lone mint imperial down a street in Notting Hill. They'd parked the car, the traffic too heavy to make progress, and cast the last Seeker Charm Tom had to narrow down Joshua's exact location.

It wobbled briefly outside a tall wooden gate that was already open, before changing direction to go through and head up the path, then toppling onto its side at the bottom of a doorstep.

They stopped at the gate. The front door was already open; they'd got there in time to see Horatio's back as he stepped into the house and slammed the door behind him.

"Shit!" Cathy said, diving behind the wall and out of sight should the Rosa turn around. "How did he get here so fast?"

"He might have used the Nether, I think the Rosa family has properties in the midlands," Tom replied. "Perhaps one of them is connected to a Londinium house, then he'd just have to step through into London. It's what I would have done, if we'd had property outside of Aquae Sulis."

"We just have to hit Josh with the egg…" Cathy said, looking up at the upper storeys of the town house.

"I could throw it, if I had a line of sight, but we can't go in there, Cat, I can't risk upsetting the Rosas in their city."

There was no apparent access to the rear of the house from the front gate. "Maybe we can go round the back." She set off down the outside of the wall. The house was on a corner and she hoped there would be access, not that she knew what she'd do if there was.

There was a garden, but no back gate, only another property backing onto the house Josh was in.

There was a sound of a door opening and footsteps on flagstones. "If you don't get out now I'm going to call the police!"

It was Josh. Cathy heard a beep of a mobile phone button, then a thwack and the sound of it smashing on the floor.

“You bastard!”

“Answer my question!” the Rosa yelled.

“Can you climb the wall?” she asked Tom but he shook his head. He pointed to the house that backed onto the garden. “We could try there.”

They sprinted round the corner, vaulted the gate and Cathy rang the doorbell, imagining Horatio cutting Josh down as they tried to avoid a scandal. She rang a second time but no one answered. Tom put his hand on the handle and used the same Charm he’d used to break into her flat. The door swung open.

“Upstairs, at the back,” Cathy said, and they took the stairs two at a time.

There was a door ahead of them, a bedroom, sumptuously decorated with a mercifully large view onto the garden. Tom lifted the lower half of the sashed window. They could see Horatio drawing his sword as Josh backed away across the grass.

“Give me the egg,” Tom said and Cathy unwrapped it with trembling hands. Holding it gently between thumb and forefinger, he leant out of the window and, after a moment that seemed like a day to Cathy, he tossed it high into the air.

“What are you doing!” she squealed as it flew upwards, not straight at Josh.

“Watch,” he said and she saw the egg hit the peak of its trajectory and then begin a downward plummet.

“Joshua Collins,” she whispered as the egg splattered the top of Josh’s head.

He cried out and looked up for the offending bird.

“It’s done,” Tom said. “Let’s go.”

“I have to make sure he’s OK,” Cathy said, but Tom shut the window and pulled her away.

“There’s nothing we can do now anyway,” he said, dragging her out of the room. “We’ve wasted enough time.”

“I have to know!” she said and kicked him in the shin. Leaving him clutching his leg, she raced down the stairs, through the house to the back door, grateful to see the key left in its lock. Tom was catching her up as she bolted into the back garden and raced to the bench she’d seen against the dividing garden wall.

“Cat!” he hissed as she jumped up onto it and looked over the top. There was no one in the garden, but she could see movement inside the house.

Cathy scrabbled over the top, kicking Tom in the process as he tried to grab her feet. She fell into the bushes on the other side, scraping her elbow on the way down. She hurried towards the house, keeping behind the shrubs on the right hand side, as sounds of smashing and chaos rang from the open back door.

She reached the back wall of the house, dropped to a crouch and crept below the nearest open window, where she dared to peep inside.

She saw Horatio staring at the broken blade of his sword in disbelief, a battered lampshade perched on his head at a jaunty angle like a boater hat. Josh staggered into view, holding a large copper saucepan, hair wild and clothes rumpled. She could make out a stylish room in the background, with a TV that cost more than a term’s fees.

“I’m not familiar with your fighting style, sir.” Horatio was stalling for time as he struggled to regain his poise. “It’s beyond chaotic.”

“I told you, if you don’t leave, I’m calling the police,” Josh shouted.

“But our business is unfinished,” Horatio continued, rounding the sofa. He glanced at a point behind Josh’s shoulder with a shocked expression and Josh fell for it, turning to look as the Rosa took the opportunity to step and thrust with what was left of the blade.

The dirty tactic would have worked, if a large white bird hadn’t flown into the room through the very window Cathy was using to spy, making Josh duck instinctively. The bird caught the blade’s swipe instead and the decapitated gull landed with a thud at his feet.

Horatio stared at the dead bird, aghast. “This is ridiculous. I have no idea which of the families are protecting you but–” He was cut off as Josh exploited the opportunity to swing the saucepan at the Rosa’s head. It connected with a terrible clang. The swordsman crumpled like a broken marionette leaving Josh white-lipped as the bloodied feathers settled at his feet.

“Holy crapola,” he said, dropping the saucepan.

Cathy was about to stand up and knock on the window, desperate to make sure he was OK and to speak to him one last time. She just wanted one kiss, one minute to say sorry, but then she heard the slam of the front door.

“I’m home!”

Josh rubbed the top of his head, feeling for what he thought was bird droppings, frowning when nothing was there. “I’m in here, Ca–” He shook his head. “Ella. I’m in the den, don’t freak out. Actually, wait there.”

He rushed out as Cathy turned away and dropped onto her backside, suddenly exhausted. She saw Tom peering over the wall, beckoning frantically. She didn’t want to move, she didn’t want to do anything. The only place she was going now was an elegant prison. Why walk towards it?

But then she imagined Josh taking her replacement into the living room and she didn't want to be found in the garden by the rich bitch. She hauled herself up, picked her way back through the shrubs and Tom reached over the wall to pull her over.

"You stupid little–"

Cathy burst into tears and he pulled her into a hug, wrapping his arms around her and holding her tight.

She sobbed into his coat until they heard a police siren. "We have to go, Cat," he said and she nodded.

"I really love him."

"I can see that now." He kissed her forehead. "I'm sorry, Cat, I really am. It's all over. We have to go home."

14

Axon drove Max and the gargoyle to the other side of Bath, and parked the car just up the road from the Holburne Museum. It was a bright autumn day in Mundanus, so the gargoyle was hunkered down in the back seat of the large estate car Axon used to run his mundane errands.

Max looked back at the gargoyle, trying to get used to the formulae carved all over it and the medieval-style bracers it was now wearing. They were decorated with an elaborate design that made Max's head ache.

"These things are itchy." The gargoyle held up its wrists. "But I have to keep 'em on, apparently. Extra protection."

"What from?"

"I dunno. Bad breath? Who cares? Everyone we ever knew is either dead or missing, there's all kinds of dodgy stuff going on in London and the Sorcerer doesn't give a rat's arse, and you're asking about these stupid itchy armbands?"

Max faced front again. "I haven't forgotten about London, or the Chapter. But the Sorcerer is right; we do need to look into this."

The gargoyle muttered something he couldn't hear. Its grumpiness was like a bad smell filling the car and just as hard to ignore.

"Stay here," he told it once the car's engine was switched off.

"How long will you be, sir?" Axon asked.

"Less than half an hour." Max struggled out of the car and onto his crutches.

He wanted to take a look at the mundane perimeter first, knowing that someone had broken into Lavandula's Nether house after going through the museum grounds in Mundanus. The main gates were locked and a notice hung over the handles:

Closed – Apologies for Any Inconvenience.

He made his way round the railings until he reached the large wooden gates he knew were set into the wall. They had a new hasp-and-staple lock, fitted with a shiny padlock that he picked with little effort.

He went through and pushed the gates closed behind him, already tired from the effort of moving with crutches. He crossed the drive up to the anchor property, which was the usual Georgian affair the puppets liked. He went to the side door. The front entrance was too exposed for his liking.

He propped one of the crutches against the wall and slipped his right hand into his pocket. His fingers found the knuckle-duster and he wriggled them into place. Quickly checking to make sure no innocents were looking through the railings, he adjusted the metal until it sat comfortably at the base of his fingers. The sorcerous markings glinted in the sunlight. He made a fist and inspected the band of thick metal running across it. Pristine.

He knocked three times, slowly, and listened for the tell-tale echo reverberating into the Nether house anchored to the mundane property. There was a pause, but there always was. If an Arbiter was expected, there would be careful preparations to ensure that everything was in order. If the knock was an unpleasant surprise, there would be arguments about who would open the door and what would be said.

The door opened, a tell-tale shimmering over the threshold indicating that it was the Nether house he was seeing into rather than the museum. Miss Lavandula had answered the door herself, opening a Way into Aquae Sulis as she did so. He hadn't expected that.

Her dress was the same dark blue as her eyes, high-necked and close-fitting in the Victorian style, hair worn up, jewels at her ears. She had the skin of a woman in her late twenties yet her file at the cloister listed her age as over three hundred years old. She was composed, inclining her head at him. As Censor of Aquae Sulis she'd had a lot of practice receiving unwanted guests and remaining polite.

The Censor was one of the many titles the puppets had picked and twisted from Roman times; she had the power to deny people access to Aquae Sulis, for whatever reason she liked, and, if she permitted them to enter, she effectively determined their social standing within their Society. As Master of Ceremonies, her brother created social events that could make or break a family in one night. Between them they had the residents of the city terrified of what they could do to them with nothing more than a comment, a look or even just a strategic omission from a guest list.

"I've been waiting for you," the Censor said, gesturing for him to come in.

He held his breath as he crossed the threshold, a habit they all had. His ears popped and there was a feathery touch on his face as he left Mundanus and crossed over into the Nether. Through a nearby window he caught a glimpse of the reflected Great Pulteney Street of Aquae Sulis but he didn't linger over it. The Nether had lost its novelty a long time ago.

The door was closed behind him. "Good afternoon, Miss Lavandula. Thank you."

It was so much easier when they invited him in. Forcing entry made everyone less reasonable to deal with.

"I knew it would reach an Arbiter's ears soon enough. Though I would have thought this a matter for Society, rather than your kind."

“Any unusual events in Aquae Sulis are our business, ma’am, especially those that may have long-term consequences. Do you know where your brother is? If so, I won’t trouble you.”

She took a breath; he knew she was weighing up whether to lie to him or not. It was in their nature, instinctive to one as old and powerful as she. “No,” she finally said. “I do not.”

“Would you mind if I asked you some questions?” It was a courtesy; he had the right to pursue an investigation and she was obligated to cooperate. It was one of the oldest laws.

“Not at all,” she replied with a cold smile.

“When was the last time you saw Mr Lavandula?”

“Monday afternoon.”

“Did he seem worried about anything?”

“My brother never worried, Mr…”

“Call me Max.”

Her nostrils flared slightly. “My brother never worried about anything, Max.”

“Even in the last days before the new season?”

“I assure you those are the most relaxed for him. The events are arranged, invitations sent and everything set into motion. I am the one most in demand the week before the season begins.”

“About that,” he said, slipping the knuckle-duster off in his pocket and retrieving his notebook. “Have you had any requests from unsavoury individuals to enter Aquae Sulis?”

“One always does at this time of year,” she sighed. “But no one that made me concerned for my family’s safety.”

“So you are concerned for your brother?”

She stiffened. “Of course. I know my brother would not leave Aquae Sulis voluntarily at this time of year, and, if something had called him away, he would have told me immediately.”

“That’s why you closed the museum.”

She nodded. “I didn’t want any unscrupulous individuals to send in staff to snoop around once they realised he was gone.”

He stared at her as she spoke, examining every movement, every flicker across her features. He believed her, and he could see she was genuinely worried. “Have you been contacted by anyone regarding your brother’s disappearance?”

“No. You’re the first.” She looked at his leg cast. “And it seems you’ve been delayed.”

“Unrelated,” he said. “No ransom demands?”

“Nothing.”

“When did you first realise he was missing?”

“We were supposed to breakfast together on Tuesday morning and discuss the last-minute entrants to the city. He never arrived.”

“And when did you last see him on Monday?”

“He left my residence at about 6pm and I believe he was intending to come home.”

“Did he have any guests?”

“No, but the staff would have been here.”

“I’ll need to speak to them too.”

“Of course. They don’t seem to know any more than I do though.”

“Are they here now?”

“No. I didn’t want anyone here except myself when your enquiries were made. One does all one can to avoid gossip at a time like this. You’ll be able to interview them at my residence.”

That explained why she opened the door. “Did your brother have any engagements on the Monday night?”

“He dined with the Irises. I know he came home, the footman and the maid told me.”

Max thought back to the data from the Sorcerer’s machine. It placed the break-in at close to midnight. It fitted so far.

“I’d like to take a look around.”

Her lips pressed together; it was the last thing she wanted. “If you wish.”

He went from room to room, no sound but the click of his crutches on the wooden floor. He couldn’t do as thorough a search as he would have if he’d been mobile and free of supervision, but he wanted to see if anything leapt out, to follow up later.

“No signs of a struggle anywhere?” he asked and she shook her head. “Nothing taken?”

“No.”

He couldn’t manage the stairs; he was starting to sweat and the fatigue was becoming hard to hide. “Thank you for your cooperation,” he said, heading for the door.

“I’d appreciate it if you could be discreet,” she said, fingertips on the door handle. “I’m sure you can imagine how delicate a situation this is.”

“I’m not exactly on speaking terms with your people,” Max said. “And we’re not known for socialising.”

She just nodded and opened the door.

“I’ll let you know if I find anything,” he said and left.

He emerged into Mundanus. The pain was making him less observant, but it made sense; she’d be worried that people would be watching the house in Aquae Sulis.

He looked through the gates and down the hill. The whole of Great Pulteney Street leading up to the house was mirrored in the Nether, forming one of the main thoroughfares in Aquae Sulis and watched at all times by their servants. That was why the mundane property had been broken into. Whatever the assailant did inside, be it knock him out or kill him, it was done with the door held open providing a quick and uncomplicated escape into Mundanus. The body could have been carried out of the garden gate, put in a car and driven anywhere.

But why? No ransom, no demands of any kind if the sister was to be believed. It made no sense.

Then he remembered that it was one of the Fae Court who'd broken in, not some screwed-up puppet. They didn't think like people. But they weren't murderers, and certainly not of one of Lady Lavender's favourites. She'd be kicking up a storm in Exilium, no doubt.

It was just as possible he'd decided to cut and run, tired of being the most important man in Aquae Sulis. It was unlikely, but possible. Did the puppets have nervous breakdowns too? Then he remembered what the machine had told them. If life had got too complicated for Mr Lavandula, he wouldn't have needed to break out of his own house.

He scanned the trees between the drive and the gate, doing his best to ignore the sweat rolling between his shoulder blades. The long grass and bushes could have snagged something. He got a few steps closer and a surge of pain stopped him.

There was a scratching sound on the other side of the wall and then two clawed stone paws appeared at the top. The gargoyle swung itself over and landed in the garden with a decent thud. Max waited for any shouts, but thankfully there were none. "I told you to stay hidden."

The gargoyle checked no one else was there and then scampered over on all four legs. “Will you just rest, for goodness’ sake? You’re hurting us.”

“I just wanted to check over there.” Max nodded towards the trees. “Anywhere between the door and the gate, something might have been dropped, it’s been closed to Mun–”

“I know. Wait and don’t move,” the gargoyle ordered and went searching.

Max swayed, wondering if Axon had a syringe in the car. Was he becoming addicted? Did he care? Was he anything more than sore hands, bruised armpits, a throbbing temple and a leg that was so painful it made him want to pull it off and hop home?

“Hey!” The gargoyle was waving something at him near one of the trees. Max made his way unsteadily, and they met halfway. “I found something.”

Max put his weight on his good leg, tucked the crutches tighter under his armpits and took the wallet as the gargoyle headed back to the tree. Its black leather was worn, stuffed with receipts, old tickets and a five-pound note. There were credit cards, a driving licence, a swipe card for one of the local business centres. Jackpot.

He pulled out the licence. “Samuel James Westonville” was printed below a picture with an address in Bath that would come in handy. He sifted through the receipts, the breakthrough distracting him from the pain. Pizza, beer, toiletries, DVDs: this was an innocent’s wallet, and the last receipt was dated on the Monday night at 10.55pm.

“Over here,” the gargoyle called, and he tucked the wallet inside his jacket. The gargoyle was halfway up a tree trunk, its thick arms and legs wrapped around it like a koala bear. It pointed out a bit of bark with a claw.

Max leaned closer and saw the dark stain and the lone brown hair snagged on a knot, waving in the breeze. He plucked it free and dropped it into an evidence bag he had folded in his back pocket. He broke off the stained piece of bark too and nodded at the gargoyle.

“Good work. We’ve got a lead.”

15

Cathy stared at the Holburne Art Museum as Tom parked the car in Great Pulteney Street. It was dusk and a few tourists were strolling down the road admiring the architecture. It was strange seeing the anchor property as a public building when Cathy knew it better in the Nether as the home of the Aquae Sulis Lavandulas, her uncle and aunt who were the Master of Ceremonies and Censor, respectively. In the Nether version of the same street in Aquae Sulis their house dominated the social structure of the area. Her mother, who was a Lavandula before being married into the Rhoeas-Papavers, gave her father the social boost enabling the family to acquire the terrace closest to the residence of the most powerful people in the city. Tom, as their eldest son, had the privilege of living in the same street, but further away.

She looked at the house she'd grown up in, remembering the nursery wing at the back, safely tucked away from any curious mundane eyes. The servants would be in the anchor property, working hard to maintain the luxurious lifestyle of the Nether house. Her parents were in there, just on the other side of the veil that separated Mundanus from their pocket reality. So close and still, thankfully, so far.

"Come on," he said when she didn't move. "Let's get you sorted out here before you face them."

Cathy unclipped the seatbelt and with leaden legs got out of the car. Her mouth was dry and her neck ached. Somehow she'd fallen asleep on the way back and now everything felt slightly unreal.

The fact that he took her right up to the mundane anchor property of his own house said a great deal. Those in Society rarely went into Mundanus but, when they did, they generally went in and out at the edge of Aquae Sulis, thereby minimising opportunities for the residents of Bath to notice people seeming to walk into a house and never coming out again, or at least approaching a garden gate and appearing to go through but never reaching the front door of the house. Tom evidently didn't want the residents of Aquae Sulis to see her return, and in her dishevelled state it made sense.

Tom muttered the Charm of Openings at the gate, put his arm around her and steered her ahead of him and into the Nether. It had been a long time since she'd seen the silver sky of Aquae Sulis and she hadn't missed it. The air was unnaturally still. She felt her chest tighten and her heart race. Instinctively she stepped back but Tom was in the way. He squeezed her briefly and the panic subsided.

Inside, the house was warm and bright. It smelt of freshly baked bread and cinnamon. She could hear a piano playing.

"Lucy?" Tom called. "I'm back."

The music stopped and his wife called from a room towards the back of the house. Cathy fidgeted. She just couldn't imagine Tom married. She couldn't quite believe this was his house and that he was living apart from their parents. Whenever she'd thought of him he was still gangling and affable, still living under their father's oppressive glare. It was hard to reconcile that with how everything had changed.

A petite woman came into the hallway, dressed in a long green gown that accentuated her tiny waist. She had the straight shining blonde hair that her little sister would have done despicable things to have, large blue eyes and fair skin. She seemed kind as she smiled and hurried over with her hands outstretched towards Cathy.

“You must be Catherine!” she said. Her voice had the tiniest hint of an American accent. “I’m delighted to meet you at last!”

Cathy clasped Lucy’s hands even though it felt bizarre to do so. She didn’t want to cut her dead in her own home. Lucy’s hands were delicate and soft and she looked like a child next to Tom.

“Thanks,” Cathy said awkwardly.

“Lucy, do you have a dress Cat could borrow?”

They both looked up at him. “Not any that would reach her ankles,” Lucy replied, appraising Cathy’s height. “Don’t worry about fashion, dear, your parents know you’ve been on the Continent.” She stood back, still holding Cathy’s hands, and looked at her clothes. “I’m glad you’re sensible enough to dress in the mundane style for travel, it’s the only way to do it as far as I’m concerned. I’ll ring for the footman, he can bring in your cases and we’ll press a dress in no time. Your parents must be dying to see you!”

“Cat’s baggage was lost,” Tom said. “We’re in a bit of a fix, aren’t we, Cat?”

Cathy refused to reinforce the lie, not wanting to play Lucy for a fool.

“It’s no problem,” Lucy said, pulling her towards the stairs. “We’ll get Catherine bathed whilst you go home and pick up one of her dresses. You did leave some there, I imagine?”

“I’m not sure I’d fit…”

“I’ll be back soon,” Tom said. “I want to tell them you’re here safe and sound anyway.” He gave her one last worried look. “You won’t…”

“Go!” Lucy laughed. “She’ll be fine and we’ll have a chance to get to know each other.”

Tom left and initially Cathy wondered whether to make a bid for freedom. But then Lucy would be left to take the blame and, whilst Cathy didn’t know her, Lucy seemed so harmless she couldn’t bring herself to get

her into trouble. And there was still nowhere to run where they couldn't find her.

"You must be exhausted," Lucy said, leading her up the stairs after calling for the lady's maid. "You'll feel so much better after a soak and a light supper. By the time you're done Tom will be back and you can dress and go to see your parents."

Lucy's voice was soft and warm, but the accent bizarre. Cathy wondered if she was trying to hide her American roots. Perhaps Tom had asked her to try and fit in. That was the main expectation placed upon young brides: to blend into Society just enough to avoid malicious gossip, but stand out just enough to receive admiration, all of which would be directed at the husband, of course, for having impressed the families enough to secure a prize calf. Both Tom and their sister Elizabeth had been born with an innate sense of how much to stand out and how to blend in at the right time but Cathy never had a clue. She couldn't understand how they could be related.

"I have a robe you can borrow," Lucy said. "You can change in the guest bedroom and bathe in my bedchamber. The fire is lit already. Had I known you were coming here first I'd have made other arrangements."

Cathy had forgotten about how they lived. How would she forget the convenience of hot running water? Showers? Flushing toilets? The Great Families called the mundanes "savages" but there was better sanitation in Mundanus.

Before they'd even reached the bedroom a small army of servants had been put to work and Cathy realised that she'd tuned out of the conversation.

"Perhaps they'll find them," Lucy was saying as she opened a door.

"Find what?"

“Your bags. Were they misplaced at the port? I remember the delays I had when I moved here. It seemed to take just as long to get out of the port as it did to cross the Atlantic.”

“Umm…” Cathy couldn’t settle on a reply. She’d got used to big lies, ones that explained away her entire childhood, not stupid things like turning up waif-like in the most inappropriate clothes ever seen in Aquae Sulis.

“I’ll send for tea,” Lucy said, letting go of Cathy’s hand at last to go over to the bell-pull.

“I don’t want tea,” Cathy blurted. She wanted a Leffe blonde beer in a tall, sweating pint glass. She wanted a kebab. And a cuddle with Josh.

“Look, something is obviously wrong here.” Lucy moved away from the bell-pull. “You don’t seem like a girl coming home. You seem like someone dragged off the street and wondering where the hell she is.” Lucy was sounding very American all of a sudden.

“It’s that obvious?”

“Honey, you’re no actress.”

Her new sister-in-law sounded more like a mundane than a daughter of a wealthy Society family but Cathy didn’t have the mental space to fathom that puzzle. She sat on the bed and put her head in her hands. It was as heavy as a bowling ball and felt just as thick. “What has Tom told you?”

“That you’ve been away in Switzerland and that your travel arrangements were disrupted.” Lucy sat next to her, strangely close. Perhaps it was an American thing. “He’s been so tense. All he said was that he was waiting for a message to come and pick you up. He raced out of the house first thing this morning before we’d even had breakfast.”

“Oh.”

“He lied to me, didn’t he?”

Cathy reddened. “Well…”

“It’s OK, I knew something was up.”

Cathy twisted to face her. “I didn’t mean to dump him in it.”

“I know he doesn’t trust me yet. It’s OK, really.”

“How long have you been married?”

Lucy frowned. “Where have you been?”

“Oh, bollocks to all of this,” Cathy said, throwing her hands up in the air. “I wasn’t in Switzerland, I was in Mundanus. I was at Cambridge for a year and then I ran away about eighteen months ago. I look like I’ve been dragged off the street because I practically was. I didn’t want to come back.”

Lucy’s eyes were as round as chocolate buttons. “You ran away and hid in Mundanus?”

“Yeah.”

“And lived there, all that time, without any help?”

Cathy regretted her honesty. “Yeah.”

“Awesome!”

She twitched. “You don’t think I’m some horrible, selfish cow?”

“No,” Lucy said with a laugh. “I figure you’ve got guts to live in Mundanus. It’s not an easy place to go if you’re brought up in Nether Society. And I’ve met your parents. I’m impressed you stood up for what you wanted, they’re pretty intimidating. So I think you’re awesome.”

Cathy scratched her head. “I didn’t stand up for myself, I ran away like a bloody coward. I avoided all of the messy stuff back then, so it’s even worse now. I don’t know what I’m going to say to them. It’s all got a bit complicated.”

Lucy grinned. “You Brits, you worry too much about what other people think.” She cleared her throat. “Sorry,” she said, the vowel sounding closer to the Queen’s English. “Listen, I can’t imagine what you’ve been through

with Tom but I can see you’re upset and I can see you’re exhausted. Take a bath, have something to eat – when Tom gets back I’ll ask him how things are at your place and, if your parents are angry, well, maybe it’d be better for you to stay here and see them in the morning after you've rested.”

Cathy felt herself welling up. “Sorry,” she said, sniffing, horribly embarrassed. “My eyes are scratchy, you know, because I’m tired.”

“I know.” Lucy smiled. “I’ll get you that robe.”

Cathy looked down at her battered trainers and grubby jeans. This was potentially the last time she’d wear trousers and comfortable footwear. “What is wrong with you?” she muttered to herself as the sniffing threatened to become snivelling. “You’re thinking about that now? Focus!”

But she couldn’t. Somewhere deep down, beneath the extraordinary fatigue, the hollow hunger, the anxiety, impotent rage and hatred of her return to the Nether, there was the knowledge that she’d have to think up a fantastic third wish and faster than she could bleat “But it’s all so unfair.”

The room was decorated like an Edwardian hotel; impersonally luxurious, floral and full of chintz. She lay back on the bed and looked up at the glass bowl of the light fitting, thinking about the tiny sprite trapped inside. Her whole life before she’d ran away she’d never even thought of them, now she found herself relating. Apart from the shining part. She’d never do that, literally or figuratively.

The robe was brought in by a silent maid who curtsied without making eye-contact. It was thick cotton, dark blue and long enough to make Cathy suspect it belonged to Tom rather than Lucy. She could hear the patter of feet up and down the stairs as the servants carried buckets of hot water to the neighbouring room to fill the bath.

Reluctantly, she took off her clothes and shrugged on the robe, waiting for the invitation to bathe. She caught a glimpse of herself in the cheval

mirror and saw how wrecked she looked. Her hair was just a tangled lump held in place by an elastic band she'd found when packing. It looked like someone had stapled a dead hamster to the back of her head. Stray wisps and her reddened eyes made her look slightly crazy. She was so pale and the skin around her eyes was so black she looked unwell. She certainly felt it.

She flopped back onto the bed, feet dangling over the edge and closed her eyes, knowing the maid would collect her when the bath was ready, and drifted towards a restless sleep.

"Miss Plain? Miss Mundane? Wake up!"

Waking was like climbing out of a well. A sharp pinprick on the tip of her nose made her eyes half open but, when she saw the faerie hovering just a few centimetres above her face, she was wide awake and scrabbling up the bed away from it.

"Time's up!" the faerie chimed with delight.

"It's not – there's still nearly twenty-four hours till the ball!"

The faerie sighed. "Lord Poppy has been so patient, considering how dreadfully boring you've been." It flew over to the mirror. "He doesn't want to wait a moment longer." It tapped the glass and it rippled like the surface of a lake. When it settled again, the room was no longer reflected. Instead Cathy could see a beautiful meadow under a blue sky.

Exilium.

"He's waiting," the faerie said with a clap of her hands. "Come on!"

"But I'm not even dressed, I can't go there in a bath robe!"

The faerie blew a raspberry. "Wearing clothes won't make any difference to how ugly you are or make you more interesting. Stop wasting time."

Cathy got off the bed, tightened and double-knotted the robe's belt and approached the mirror. Of course he wanted the final wish to be made in

Exilium, it would make it so much easier to enslave her, or reduce her to an automaton as he'd threatened. She'd never been in the other world, but she'd had countless lessons about how dangerous it was. On the other side of the mirror a careless word or even just a simple lapse in etiquette could lead a mortal into slavery as quickly as an insect dropped in a specimen jar.

Her family's patron was waiting, and there was nothing to be done. Cathy held her breath and stepped through.

16

“If Elizabeth Papaver is wearing blue I swear I shall die.”

Will raised an eyebrow at Imogen, wondering if there would ever be a year when his sister wouldn’t make such a fuss on the way to the opening ball. It always peaked when they were in the carriage, and always focused on what everyone else would be wearing.

“I thought you bribed someone to look at the delivery before it left the tailors,” Nathaniel said, not bothering to hide his boredom.

“Elizabeth might have paid them more to tell me the wrong colour,” Imogen said. “It does happen. And ladies have seamstresses, not tailors.”

“Oh, for goodness’ sake, Imogen,” Will said. “Even if she does wear the same colour as you, it won’t exactly be the scandal of the season.”

It silenced her long enough for them to leave the Crescent. Will knew why their parents always rode in a separate carriage ahead of them; so they didn’t have to listen to her nervous prattling.

“I wonder what *Catherine* Papaver will be wearing,” she said. “I do hope it isn’t yellow. That would make her look positively horrendous.”

“It doesn’t take much,” Nathaniel said and they sniggered.

Will decided to remain aloof from it all. He wasn’t looking forward to seeing Catherine either, but he’d made his plans and all was prepared. Being sucked into cruel speculation wasn’t going to achieve anything.

“You have to accept it, William,” his mother had said to him that morning. He’d sought her out after a sleepless night of endless imaginary arguments with his father. “Marriage happens to us all.”

“But why her? Why not Elizabeth?”

“Do you really want to marry that empty-headed child?”

“No,” he’d admitted. “But at least she wouldn’t embarrass us. What did I do to insult Father so? I’ve never given him cause for anger or disappointment. Why punish me like this?”

“Oh, Will.” His mother sat next to him. “It isn’t like that at all. Don’t you see how this proves how much trust he has in you? He knows he can depend upon you to make this a success.”

Will struggled to bring his thoughts back to the carriage when his brother cleared his throat.

“Father says the Master of Ceremonies wasn’t back this afternoon,” Nathaniel said, having realised Will wasn’t going to be baited.

“How strange,” Imogen said. “Cecilia hasn’t heard a thing either.”

“Cecilia Peonia is an empty-headed fool,” Nathaniel said. “Of course she hasn’t.”

“She happens to have one of the best ears in town for the latest news.”

“Only one?” Will asked.

“And an excellent nose for gossip,” Imogen continued, ignoring him. “For her not to know a thing about all of this is most unusual. I feel sorry for the Censor, it must have been a terrible week.”

Will tried to imagine what it would be like to have an elder brother disappear without a trace.

“What?” Nathaniel asked as the broad smile bloomed across Will’s lips.

“Nothing. Ah, we’re here.”

Nathaniel was first out of the carriage after the footman had lowered the steps, then Will, who helped Imogen. His parents were straightening their attire nearby, closer to the entrance of the Assembly Rooms, and the streets

of Aquae Sulis were filled with the clatter of horses' hooves and carriages delivering attendees.

Imogen was keen to get inside as quickly as possible. She'd made that clear as they'd left the house; the silver embroidery of her bodice against the indigo of her dress was designed to look its best beneath sprite light inside the ballroom, not the diffuse grey light of the Nether. Nathaniel in contrast was happy to pose on the pavement, watching the other guests arriving, making sure he cut the finest silhouette with his formal attire and rapier.

Will scanned the carriages. None were emblazoned with the Papaver coat of arms, so he extended his arm to Imogen, thinking that, if he could keep her sweet for even just the first hour of the ball, it would be to his advantage as well as a first.

They made their way into a long, wide corridor filled with people meandering towards the ballroom. They were a little early; his father didn't believe in being fashionably late, which always irritated Imogen as it deprived her of a large audience for her entrance. Will was indifferent, used to being the one overlooked. He wasn't as famed as his brother, nor in line to inherit the family's power, and Imogen was good at stealing away any other surplus attention.

"I've heard a rumour," she said, in her best conspiratorial whisper, "there's to be a surprise special guest this evening."

"Perhaps it will be the Master of Ceremonies," Will replied, uninterested. Normally he would have been happy to be entertained by such intrigues – they passed the time, after all – but tonight he had an agenda that took the shine off it all.

As they walked between the marble columns, he was greeted by people he hadn't seen for years and certainly hadn't missed. He made promises to

play cards, to delight them with tales of adventure and to pass on the gossip from the colonies. He could hear murmurings about the absence of Mr Lavandula and wondered if the Papavers would want to delay the announcement because of the absence of Catherine's uncle.

They entered the ballroom and it was as Will expected: unchanged, lavishly lit, beautifully decorated with its plain blue walls and elegant white stucco borders. The musicians were already in place up on the first-floor gallery overlooking the expansive space. Will could see the parents and chaperones of young ladies being approached by his peers, all eager to make arrangements for the minuet dancing that would begin the ball.

"And who, pray tell, is that?" Imogen whispered to him, skilfully indicating the direction with her new fan. It was still folded and now strung on a silver chain attached to her bracelet to hang free as she danced.

Will noticed the young man talking to Oliver Peonia. His friend usually had a constant half-smile on his face and cheeks like apples, round, red and shiny, but as he spoke in close conference with the stranger, Oliver was stern and rather pale.

He noticed Will and the spontaneous flash of his eyebrows in silent greeting was enough to make the stranger turn and look in their direction. Will spotted the deep red rose before any other feature, and from Imogen's surprised gasp he assumed she had also.

"That can't be the surprise guest!" she said behind her fan. "Not a Rose! Cecilia would have told me."

"Looks as if he's already making an impression," Will remarked, studying his best friend's demeanour.

"They're coming over," Imogen said. Will felt her grip on his arm tighten. "He's rather handsome. I've never met a Rose before, but I've heard they're ruthless. How exciting."

“Good evening,” Oliver said with a bow. “Imogen, what a pleasure to see you again.”

He kissed her hand and Imogen waited patiently until it was over.

“Good evening,” Will replied, adding his own bow.

“Will you permit me to introduce my guest?” Oliver was trying his best, but Will could see that he was distinctly uncomfortable. “Imogen and William Reticulata-Iris, this is Horatio Gallica-Rosa of the city of Londinium.”

Horatio bowed and Imogen extended a gloved hand as he reached for it. He kissed it lightly. “A pleasure. You are indeed as lovely as I have been told.”

Imogen blushed the appropriate amount. “Are you in Aquae Sulis for the season?”

“Indeed. I’ve heard so much about it. Would you do me the honour of partnering you for the first minuet?”

“I would be delighted. William, I believe Father wants to speak with you.” She was using their code to indicate she wanted to be left alone to speak with the Rosa.

“Do you play cards, Mr Rosa?” William asked.

“I have been known to play a hand of poker now and then,” Horatio replied with a dangerous look in his eye.

“Then perhaps I will see you in the card room later,” Will concluded and took his leave of them.

Oliver also made an excuse once he realised what Imogen wanted and fell into step with Will. “You may need to warn your brother about him, my friend,” he whispered.

“Oh?”

“Horatio is the finest duellist in Albion, or so he is wont to believe.” Oliver leaned in closer. “And he’s heard of Nathaniel’s reputation as a fine swordsman. A cautionary word in your brother’s ear may be wise.”

“Regardless of wisdom, my brother has never taken any of my advice, and does not respond well to warnings,” said Will dismissively. “If he insists on getting into a duel, that’s his affair. Now, tell me, why are you sponsoring a Rosa for the season?”

“Father insisted.” Oliver’s glance at his parents as they passed was rather cool. “And don’t ask me why, I have no idea. That Rosa is an oily wretch and I fear he will do nothing but cause trouble, as they always do. Have you heard the rumours about his family?”

“I’ve heard enough to infer they take the most direct path to their goals, even if it takes them through unsavoury places.”

“I’ve heard their wealth is drawn from a network of criminal activity in Mundanus.” Oliver glanced back at Horatio. “He’s greasing up your sister, Will, shouldn’t you go back?”

“What a vulgar turn of phrase,” Will said with a smirk. “An excellent souvenir of the Grand Tour, I shall do my best to make it popular this season. Imogen can take care of herself. If there’s anyone who should be worried it’s Cecilia for not informing her that a dashing swordsman is in town.”

“Cecilia was just as shocked as I was,” Oliver said, briefly distracted by a young beauty sweeping past. “It was sprung on both of us this afternoon. Something’s rotten about it, I just don’t know what. How did the gifts go down?”

“Well. Yours?”

“Jolly good actually. Father has promised me the estate in Derbyshire.”

“Congratulations. Mine has secured me a bride.”

Oliver stopped. “Gosh. Who is it to be?”

“You’ll see,” said Will with a wink.

“Oh, a disappointment then,” Oliver said. “If you were pleased you’d be falling over yourself to tell me.”

Will laughed. “Now I see the danger of travelling the world with one’s best chum; you know me too well now.”

The ballroom was filling up; he could no longer see Imogen and Horatio. He caught a glimpse of the Censor talking to his father, a statement in and of itself, as dozens of people had been desperately trying to catch her eye. When they parted, his father surreptitiously beckoned him over.

“I’ll see you in the card room later, old boy,” Will said to Oliver. “The pater wants a word.”

He navigated through the greetings and “welcome back”s and smiled at his father.

“The Censor is agreeable to announcing the engagement before the country dances,” he said, sotto voce. “I had hoped for one before the ball begins, but she has something else to announce, apparently.”

“I’ve heard there is a surprise guest, and it isn’t the Gallica-Rosa over there trying to woo Imogen.”

“I’ll see to that in a minute. A Rosa?” He shook his head in disapproval. “The Censor has been distracted this week, but that is hardly an excuse for allowing the riff-raff into Aquae Sulis. Perhaps it’s just as well to announce it later; the Papavers haven’t yet arrived.”

“Perhaps they want to be fashionably late,” Will suggested, now appreciating the crowd filling the ballroom. “Though any later than this would be approaching the embarrassing end of fashionable.”

A light knocking reduced the crowd’s low roar to a murmur as all faces turned to the gallery and the Censor rapping her closed fan against the rail.

“Ladies and gentlemen, it is my pleasure to welcome you to the Assembly Rooms this evening, and to the opening ball of the Aquae Sulis season.” Miss Lavandula’s voice projected magnificently. She was dressed in a lavender-blue ball gown, and a dazzling diamond brooch drew Will’s eye to her décolletage. “My brother sends his profound apologies for not being here this evening. He’s abroad dealing with a matter for our patron.”

Will noticed the ripple of commentary that spread through the room. He wasn’t sure if anyone believed her, but saying her brother’s absence was due to a demand from their patron made it impossible for anyone to speculate openly without being seen as crass. If he had disappeared, she had bought herself a few weeks at the most.

“But I can assure you that he arranged everything for a most spectacular season before he left,” she continued, drawing the crowd’s attention fully back to her address. “With the blessing of the Council of Aquae Sulis, I will be acting as Censor and Master of Ceremonies until his return.” Another ripple; her announcements were like pebbles being tossed into the social pond. “Whilst we will of course miss him, we shall not let him down. In a moment, the first minuet will begin, but first, I’d like to present to you our guest of honour for this evening.”

She looked to her left and beckoned someone onto the balcony with a smile. A young Indian woman, with hair like a river of black silk and flawless mahogany skin, walked out to take her hand, eliciting an excited rush of whispers from the assembly. She was dressed in a richly decorated sari that couldn’t have been more different from the corseted fashions on display.

“Ladies and gentlemen, it is my deepest pleasure to introduce you to Maharaj Kumari Rani Nucifera-Nelumbo, daughter of the Maharaja of the princely state of Rajkot in India.”

There was a spontaneous burst of applause and the princess smiled down upon them. Will looked for Oliver, wanting to share his anger. He'd spent two months trying to secure an audience with the princess with the express purpose of sponsoring her into Aquae Sulis on behalf of the family. She'd refused polite requests and gifts; now he knew why. Someone had beaten him to it.

"Princess Rani has been sponsored into the city by the Alba-Rosa family, represented this evening by Cornelius Alba-Rosa and his sister Amelia from Londinium." They were beckoned onto the gallery too, where they were met with applause and no little speculation. Amelia was strikingly beautiful, the white of her dress making her skin creamy and the dark brown of her hair richer. So that was who had pipped him to the post. Oliver was lost in the crowd and would no doubt bait him about it later. He did spot Horatio though, whose lips were pressed tight together with barely disguised fury.

"It seems the Gallica isn't very happy about this," Will said to his father, the applause protecting him.

"The Albas and Gallicas are feuding again," his father replied. "Horatio Gallica-Rosa probably thought he'd have the admiration of Londinium for getting into the city for the season."

"And now he's nothing special," Will said, looking back up at the Albas, considering how furious Horatio must feel to be so spectacularly upstaged. Amelia's gaze fell on him and lingered for a few moments. Will smiled and she returned it, openly and without a coy glance away. His smile broadened at her boldness, but then she was ushered away by the Censor as the musicians began the opening bars of the first minuet.

"Are you going to dance?" his father asked.

"No, I was waiting for Catherine. I thought it would be politic."

The floor cleared as those planning to converse rather than dance gravitated to the edges of the room. Imogen was taking her place with Horatio, who was putting on a good show of not caring about the Albas as they entered.

William saw his mother. She made straight for them. “The Papavers have arrived.”

“They’re rather late,” Father muttered.

“But something’s wrong,” Mother continued. “Catherine isn’t with them.”

Max knocked on the door covered with sparkling words and entered at the sound of Ekstrand’s voice. Inside was a modest ballroom with a large mirror filling most of one wall. A small amount of light cast by an oil lantern resting at the Sorcerer’s feet revealed formulae chalked, painted and scratched onto the floorboards. The symbols arced out from the mirror, and as he hobbled closer Max realised the mirror was actually at the centre of a series of concentric circles of formulae, unbroken across the wall and floor.

Ekstrand was dressed in the same way as he’d been the very first time Max met him, when he was given the field glasses for testing. He wore a black morning suit with long tails, and his hair was neatly coiffed. He gave a curt nod. He held a thick tray upon which sat an artefact looking like a cross between a cockroach and an owl. It was made of wood and brass, had many spindly legs and a pair of huge eyes with closed brass eyelids. It was currently inert.

“We’ll begin once Axon is here. Where is the gargoyle?”

“I told it to wait in the parlour, as you asked, sir,” Max replied, leaning on his crutches.

“As you can see, I’ve prepared substantial wards.” Ekstrand pointed at the formulae. “We can’t be too careful.”

There was a knock on the door and Ekstrand called Axon in. “Any problems, Axon?”

“None, sir. I’m ready.” There was the sound of a rifle being closed.

Max glanced back at the butler and watched him pull the butt of a large-calibre elephant gun into his shoulder and take a marksman’s stance, the barrel pointed at the mirror.

The ring of a tiny bell sounded from the artefact and each of the mechanical legs lifted and settled again. Max recognised the signs of calibration, even though he’d never seen an artefact of that exact design before.

“The twin has entered the Nether,” Ekstrand said. “I’m going to activate the link. Be ready.”

Ekstrand pressed a small nubbin on the top of the brass head and there was a gentle mechanical whirring as the eyelids opened, revealing two mirrored disks. At the same time the large mirror on the wall rippled as if it had become liquid yet remained impossibly flat and vertical. The distorted reflection of the three of them in the room with the lantern was replaced by the silver sky of the Nether and the familiar headquarters for the Bath Chapter loomed high.

“Excellent,” Ekstrand muttered.

Judging by how huge the building looked, and the angle, Max surmised that a replica of the artefact on the tray was now in the Nether – the “twin” – and that the image reflected in its mirror eyes was being shown in the mirror in front of him, like a huge scrying glass. Max had no idea how it worked. It wasn’t his place to understand sorcery.

The cloister, at first glance, looked undamaged. It was a large two-storey building with stout fortified outer walls reminiscent of a Norman fort, although it was much larger than its anchor and the majority of real Norman buildings in Mundanus. The Sorcerers, unlike the Fae, were able to embellish an anchor property's reflection in the Nether, and from the cloister's design Max theorised that they were somehow able to combine reflections to make amalgamated buildings in the Nether. Its windows were small, some only arrow slits, and there was a squat tower at each corner.

"You can read a cloister and learn all about the Sorcerer," Max recalled his mentor saying as they stood outside it years before, not far from where the twin artefact was.

He'd pointed out the Norman influence, the initial vision for the cloister established by the first Sorcerer of Wessex, who'd been inspired by the architecture of the time. Inside, the building was more medieval in style. His mentor told him that it was Ekstrand's predecessor who'd ripped out the heart of the fort and put in the cloister, giving the building a completely different interior once past the outer wall. They didn't talk about what Ekstrand had changed, if anything, and Max wasn't sure how many other Sorcerer Guardians of Wessex there had been. The Chapter Master didn't think Arbiters needed to know such things.

Ekstrand pressed something on the artefact's back and it started to walk forwards; it was then that Max realised the tray had a frictionless surface. The image on the mirror shifted, the twin moving forwards too.

"No damage, no signs of forced entry," Max said as the artefact approached the arched wooden doors.

It went inside, Ekstrand manipulating its direction and speed with the twin, concentrating intently.

Seeing the entrance from only two inches above ground level gave an odd impression of the archway and its thick walls. It also made the sole of the boot the artefact discovered within seem as tall as a tree.

“A body,” Ekstrand said.

“And no one has cleared it,” Max added.

Ekstrand manoeuvred the device around the boot, the scrying glass revealing the plain, functional clothing of one of the cloister staff. The forward movement seemed to slow down.

“There’s something impeding its progress,” Ekstrand said as he scrutinised the twin device on the tray.

“Congealed blood,” Max said. “In the Nether it would take longer for the moisture to evaporate so it wouldn’t have dried out yet.”

After a few moments the view changed and a dark patch on the man’s shirt filled the glass. “You’re right,” Ekstrand said. “I’m going to press on.”

A second body soon came into view, another member of staff, close to the body of the first. “It’s hard to tell what inflicted the injuries,” Max said, seeing another bloodstain on the clothing. “I’m guessing they’re stab wounds, but I can’t be certain without going there myself.”

“Not yet,” Ekstrand replied, directing the artefact out of the other side of the entrance archway and into the first cloister.

There were more bodies. The device was turned in a circle and, almost everywhere the scrying glass could show, there were slaughtered men and women. Ekstrand turned the device right and picked a path between two of the deceased. There were no red patches on the clothes in sight.

“Can you move it to look at the neck, sir?” The view changed as the artefact turned slightly and headed towards a shirt collar. Max recognised one of the researchers. “He’s been strangled. What’s that?”

He pointed at something green in the background, the colour out of place amongst the sandstone. The device was steered around the body, and Max looked again at the man's face, recalling his attention to detail and reliability. He looked like he was asleep.

The device made its way past the hand of another victim, in gigantic proportions that filled the screen for a moment, the wrinkles in the skin looking like crevasses, the pale knuckles like a mountain range. Another face came into view, this time a woman with her eyes open and glistening like wet marbles. A green stem replete with jagged-edged leaves emerged from her open mouth. A thorn had pierced her lower lip.

"Rose," Ekstrand said and Max nodded.

"I've never seen a Rosa do anything like this," Max said.

"I doubt they'd have a Charm powerful enough to do that. This is the work of Rose herself, or the brothers Thorn." He adjusted a dial on the artefact's back, part of the casing opened and the small horn of an in-built Sniffer emerged. After a few seconds, remarkably quickly, another little *ping* indicated enough air had been processed to identify a residue. Ekstrand nodded. "It's Rose. Without a doubt."

Max looked down at the floor, turning his attention inwards. As far as he knew, no Fae had ever openly attacked the Sorcerers since they'd been imprisoned in Exilium. Whilst they could enter the Nether and, under particular circumstances, certain places in Mundanus, most never dared, too fearful of retribution for breaching the laws agreed by Fae royalty. They still tried to meddle with innocents, but always through their puppets. Nothing like this.

"Something must have changed," Ekstrand said. "And it has to be related to the London problem. It's too much of a coincidence that the Arbiter there turned a blind eye to a Rosa's crime. Rose must have known

you were reporting it and attacked the Cloister to stop the information getting back to me."

"But why not try to hide that fact?" Max asked. "What would be the point of covering up Rose corruption in London only to make it obvious they'd murdered an entire Chapter?"

"Perhaps that is a statement in and of itself." Ekstrand was scowling at the glass. "Does this not say, 'The Rose did this, and we're not afraid of your reprisal'?"

"I'm not sure." Max adjusted his grip on the crutches, his palms aching. He didn't feel satisfied by that explanation, but he didn't have enough evidence to counter it. He spotted a body that had collapsed over one of the internal window ledges facing into the quad. "There's a body on the left, over there – can you use it to move the artefact to a higher position?"

As Ekstrand worked, Max thought over everything he knew and concluded it was in fact very little. Innocents had disappeared in London with a pattern suggesting Fae involvement, all connected to a modelling agency in Judd Street that was probably a front organisation owned by a Rosa puppet. He had witnessed a kidnapping, and the corruption of two Arbiters from the Camden Chapter, first-hand, and they'd tried to kill him. Twice. As he tried to report the crime, his own Chapter had been destroyed.

Now there was evidence that the Roses were behind the destruction of the Chapter, as well as involved in the London corruption, it seemed that the two had to be connected. But something didn't sit right with it all.

"How could Lady Rose, or the brothers Thorn, find the cloister?" he asked.

"I don't know how anyone outside the Chapter could have found it, Fae or otherwise," Ekstrand replied. "But it's clear the Roses are up to no good

in London and prepared to go to extreme lengths to keep anyone else out of it."

"Is there any way the residue could have been left by another, to frame the Roses?"

"None. It's Rose, no doubt about it. None of the Fae can use each other's magic."

Max watched the glass. The twin artefact was now picking its way up the body's legs. At the highest point it could reach, Ekstrand turned it and adjusted where it stood to take in the carnage filling that side of the cloister walk.

"It looks like they killed each other," Max said after a few moments of studying the positioning of the bodies. "That's what I couldn't understand; if assailants entered through the door, the alarm would have been raised and reinforcements sent to defend. But there aren't enough bodies in the entranceway to reflect that, and the bodies here are too spread out. It's like the alarm wasn't raised at all."

"The Roses are particularly adept at stirring passions," Ekstrand said. "It's speculation at this point, but I suspect they cast a Charm that drove the staff to kill each other. It must have been airborne, and incredibly powerful." He paused, looking away from the glass for a moment. "I may have underestimated these Fae."

"But what about the Arbiters not in the field? They would have been immune."

"Murdered by staff on the rampage?" Ekstrand suggested. "We'll know more once I've secured it and sent you in. But there's no possibility of that until I've cleared the air and checked for any traps they may have left behind." He turned to face Max. "No one must know about this."

"Until the Moot," Max nodded.

“No!” Ekstrand shook his head as he set the tray down. “The other Sorcerers are the last people in the worlds I’d want to know about this.”

“But the Fae have destroyed a Chapter, and it’s got to be rooted in London’s corruption. Surely the Sorcerers need to know how serious this is?”

“No one must know that we’ve been so seriously compromised. If anyone outside this room discovers what has happened we will have two more major problems on our hands.” He held up a finger. “One: the other Sorcerers will know that we are vulnerable. The Sorcerer of Mercia has always had an eye on my territory, he could use this as an opportunity to take my domain. Two: if word gets out to the Fae-touched in Aquae Sulis and surrounds they’ll be stealing innocents and acquiring properties faster than one crippled Arbiter can deal with. We need to understand how the Roses found the cloister, how they’ve corrupted the Camden Chapter and how far up that corruption goes. If we drag the Roses in front of either the Sorcerers or the Fae royalty, we may lose our chance to find these things out as well as reveal our weakened state.”

Max looked from him to the glass. “I understand, sir. I have a lead on the disappearance of the Master of Ceremonies. I’m planning to follow it up tonight.”

“Good,” Ekstrand said. “Leave this to me, I’ll let you know when the cloister is secure. And Maximilian?”

“Yes sir?”

“Be careful. A crippled Arbiter is better than none at all.”

17

When Cathy stepped through the mirror into Exilium the colours were even brighter and for a moment all she could do was take in its beauty. The green of the meadow was the purest one could possibly imagine, as if someone had distilled the essence of green and fashioned individual blades of grass from it. The sky was the deep blue of the most perfect summer's day in Mundanus.

The space behind her rippled once and then she saw nothing but meadow and sky. She didn't know a Charm of Openings to get out of Exilium; if Lord Poppy or the faerie didn't open a Way for her, she'd be trapped there, forever.

She could still remember the day her mother told her about Exilium. She described it as the most beautiful prison that could ever be, reminding Cathy of her mother's life. Even back then the seeds of rebellion were growing in her gut. The details were vague; the evil Sorcerers split the worlds to keep the wonderful, kind and beautiful Fae away from people, depriving Mundanus of magic and the joy of the Fae. When she'd asked if their family lived in Exilium her mother had laughed and said she was one of the privileged who lived between the Split Worlds, in something they called the Nether. Her mother said they were lucky but the reasons why didn't stick in Cathy's memory. After her experience with Lord Poppy she felt more sympathy for the Sorcerers. Mundanus was better off without the Fae.

The faerie was flying ahead, too fast for her to keep up without sprinting. There was no way she was going to arrive in a bath robe *and* be sweaty and out of breath so she walked, calling to mind the rules of Exilium. All she could remember with certainty was that she shouldn't eat or drink anything. Less than a second after she recalled the rule, her stomach grumbled and her tongue was sticking to the roof of her mouth. She did her best to ignore them and kept going. The grass was soft and springy beneath her bare feet, the sun gentle. If she hadn't been walking towards her doom, it would have been quite pleasant.

The faerie was leading her up a gentle hill, and when she reached its crest Cathy could see a small wood straight ahead. The faerie had brought her through mercifully close to Lord Poppy's domain. She didn't waste any time. Like a dentist appointment, it was better to get it out of the way as swiftly as possible.

When she reached the trees, a path through them came into sight, made of thousands of poppy petals, which felt blissfully soft underfoot. Soon she was at the edge of a clearing where a cluster of red blooms crowded around Lord Poppy like adoring children. The faerie hovered at his shoulder, conveying a startling amount of hatred with such tiny eyes.

"Ah, my little sunlit one." He smiled and held out a hand towards her. "Time for your third wish, Catherine Rhoeas-Papaver. I wanted to hear it in person. I like to watch condemning words fall from mortal lips, it amuses me so."

She went to him, trying not to display her reluctance. "I must confess my Lord, I thought I had a little more time; the ball isn't until tomorrow."

"Oh, but my dear, time is a fickle thing, especially when one is here in our beautiful prison. Why, a moment in Exilium can be a year in Mundanus,

and a week in the Nether. Sometimes it is but a moment. However, I'm certain the ball has already begun."

His long fingers clasped around her hand and a pulse of magic passed through her.

I've already impressed him.

She looked at him as the thought landed in her mind like a letter on a mat, feeling the effects of her first wish coursing through her, slowing her racing pulse. What better way to impress one's patron than to defeat the best swordsman of the Great Families without lifting a finger? More than that, she'd humiliated the Rosa. Lord Poppy told Lady Rose that her wish was responsible, leading Horatio to seek her out. Now she understood he'd done that simply to land her in a predicament. He wanted to see how she'd navigate her way out of trouble.

Cathy reined in her elation. It wasn't over yet, and she was an entire world away from any Arbiter's protection. It was also possible that if she made a mess of the third wish Lord Poppy would conveniently forget about the Rosa and enslave her anyway.

"I hope my third wish will impress you, Lord Poppy," she said as steadily as she could, "if I haven't already." When he said nothing, she closed her eyes, feeling his grip tighten around her hand. Free of purely trying to impress him, she turned her mind towards what she really wanted, and how to translate that into a wish. It came to her, fully formed, as if it had always been deep down and released to float up to the surface. "I wish I could achieve my full potential," she said, opening her eyes, "in such a way as to not draw the attention of the Arbiters, nor endanger my life, nor those of the individuals I love and care for – be they Fae, a member of the Great Families or a mundane." As she spoke the words, she remembered writing it

out as a child, learning it by heart when her father had given a gruff nod instead of ripping it apart. The last words were a later addition.

Lord Poppy remained motionless, scrutinising her intensely for a moment before his cold inspection melted into a smile. “How delightful, and how clever of you. For is that not what we all wish for our favourites?”

“I aim to please, Lord Poppy,” she said, trembling as his grip tightened even more.

“I grant you your wish, Catherine Rhoeas-Papaver, though I warn you, the path to one’s fulfilment is never easy for someone such as you.”

“Such as me?”

He licked his lips. “Mortal,” he finally said. “You have surprised me, I’m not ashamed to admit it. It’s been such a long time since a mortal was able to do that. Oh, some of your family and distant relations have amused me, some have pleased me, some have disappointed me. But none have ever done anything *unexpected*.” He pulled her hand closer, pushing the loose sleeve of the robe down to her elbow and leaned forwards. He ran his nose along her arm, sniffing her skin gently, making her rigid with fear. “I’m tempted to keep you here.”

“But…you said if I impressed you I’d–”

“Oh, yes,” he said, dropping her hand. “We made a contract, I recall. How positively tedious. Very well, you shall return to Aquae Sulis.” He took a step back, looking her up and down as the faerie scowled at her. “Do you know the story of Cinderella?”

She nodded, unable to speak, the dread clogging her throat.

“It must have been one of your favourites?”

“It couldn’t have been,” the faerie said before she could reply. “In Cinderella it was her sisters who were ugly.”

Lord Poppy swatted it away. It flew up into one of the trees and stamped its foot on a branch.

“Doesn’t every girl dream of being Cinderella?”

“I didn’t,” Cathy admitted, truth being the best policy in Exilium.

His face fell. “Really? Another surprise. You seem to be woven out of them. I want to keep you. I don’t care about contracts made in the Nether anyway, only those made in Exilium really count for anything.”

“But…but you said I was needed in Aquae Sulis!”

“Oh, yes, that’s true,” he sighed. “Well, that settles it. You will be my Cinderella–”

“I could just miss the ball,” she offered, not liking where he was going.

“No! I won’t hear of it! It’s the first ball of the season, and I want my new favourite to be there, and be the centre of attention.”

“But–”

“Enough!” he said and she shut her mouth. “I have never met a mortal with so many words ready to interrupt! Why are you making such a fuss? Any young woman in the Great Families would give many years of their life to have what I’m about to give you.”

She had to accept that whatever he was going to do, it was going to be awful and inevitable.

“But before you go,” he said, lifting her chin, “let me give you some advice, to help with your third wish. Send a servant into Mundanus to purchase canvases and paints. The rest will become clear.”

“I can’t paint!”

“You should try,” he replied. “I want you to fulfil your potential. You wouldn’t want to disappoint me, would you?”

“No, my Lord,” she said, focusing on the grass and poppy flowers instead of his black eyes.

“Excellent. Now…” He stooped to pick one of the poppies at his feet and then blew gently across its petals. “Close your eyes. Good. Now breathe in deeply.”

She felt a petal tickle her chin as she breathed in the scent. In Mundanus the red poppy was scentless, but in Exilium it smelt divine. She felt dizzy, then a tingling on her skin and her shoulders felt bare. Something was tickling her legs and she felt a slight pressure around her waist. With horror she realised the robe had gone, replaced by something much lighter.

“Don’t open your eyes until I tell you,” he whispered in her ear. “Now, as much as I want to stay and play with you, I understand Lady Rose will be at Court today and I wouldn’t want to miss the look on her face when I mention your name.” He sighed like a sated lover. “I will watch your progress with interest, Catherine Rhoeas-Papaver.” She felt his hand on her back, a tingling across her face and chest as something changed in front of her. “Open your eyes!” he said and pushed her forwards.

She felt the gentle brush of the threshold between Exilium and the Nether across her face as she stumbled through. She was at one of the side entrances of the ballroom in the Aquae Sulis Assembly Rooms, usually kept closed during the minuets so that people didn’t stray onto the dance floor and interrupt the dance.

As she just had.

The music stopped and the dancers moved back, startled by the sudden appearance of a young woman staggering into their midst. A dreadful silence filled the room as she stood shivering, every eye upon her.

The faces blurred into a tableau of expressions ranging from shock to amusement. She looked down, seeing a gown made of poppy petals floating out from her waist to mimic the shape of a ball gown. The petals were clinging to her upper body like they were held by a static charge but she

was decent at least, and wearing shoes so soft they felt like they'd been stitched out of petals too. Her hair felt strange.

She couldn't lift her face as she felt the attention upon her, a thousand memories resurfacing: of saying the wrong thing, tripping over skirts, sneezing at exactly the wrong time and all the agonising moments in between. She was eight again, standing next to the piano, her family, the Irises, the Censor and Master of Ceremonies all watching and waiting for her to sing and nothing but the dying croak of a sick bullfrog emerging. Over the years she'd soaked up the disappointed expressions as people saw her plain features after admiring her beautiful sister, the kindest in Society offering a maddening pity instead, none of them wondering whether there was a sharp mind beneath. And, all the while, the awful urge to laugh in the tight, nervous staccato the fear always brought with it.

A steady click of shoes made her look up, fearing it was her father, who must have been somewhere in the crowd, but it was a young man striding confidently across the ballroom, the dancers parting to let him reach her. He wasn't as tall as Tom but broad in the shoulders, his brown hair streaked in places with sun-kissed strands and long enough to brush his collar. He was tanned, not the usual pale-skinned face of one of the Great Families. His eyes were dark brown and focused very much on her. Something about them was familiar but she couldn't place him. A blue flower was tucked into his buttonhole, but she was so panicked, she couldn't remember what it was.

He stopped a couple of paces away and gave a deep bow with a slight click of his heels. He straightened and held out a hand, which she stared at, dumbly. He took a step forward and scooped her hand up to his lips, sending a murmur through the crowd. Still holding it, he looked into her

eyes and said, “Catherine Rhoeas-Papaver, may I welcome you back to Aquae Sulis.”

She just blinked, her voice lying dead somewhere in her stomach.

Unfazed, he looked up at the gallery. “If the Censor permits, I feel a waltz would be the only dance that could follow Miss Papaver’s spectacular entrance.”

All of the musicians, and all of the spectators, turned as one to look at the Censor, who gave a slight nod.

The music began and the man pulled her closer. “No greeting for me, Miss Papaver?”

“I can’t dance,” she said, trying to slip her hand out of his, but he didn’t let go and now his other arm was about her waist.

“Don’t worry about that.”

As they started to waltz, Cathy felt light, her steps confident, as if her feet knew where to go even though she didn’t. He guided her around the room as the crowd drew further back, preferring to watch the spectacle rather than join them.

“Don’t watch your feet, look at me.” He looked amused. “Don’t you remember me?”

She could feel the flush rising up her throat. “No.”

“I’m William Reticulata-Iris.”

Somehow she didn’t crush his toes, and his arm tightened around her waist as she gawped at him.

“Smile,” he said through his teeth.

“I didn’t recognise you,” she said. “Sorry.”

“I barely recognised you,” he said, his whisper tickling her ear. “You look divine. You’ve blossomed.”

She pulled a face. “Yeah right.”

His eyebrows shot up. How he kept guiding her around the floor and looking as poised as he did so, she had no idea. “Are you branding me a liar?” When she kept quiet he smirked. “Or do you consider me a fool with poor taste? Either way, surely you should smile for the crowd whilst you insult me.”

“I’m not falling for this,” she whispered back. “I know you don’t want to marry me, as much as I don’t want to marry you, there’s no need to pretend.”

“Careful,” he said, squeezing her hand. “You don’t even know me yet.”

“Exactly,” she replied. “It’s absurd. And if you think that dancing with me and whispering some bobbins into my ear is going to work, think again.”

“What if I was telling the truth?”

She tried to look at him properly, but he held her close. “Shut up,” she said.

“This isn’t the nicest thank-you I’ve ever had for saving someone from social death.”

“Oh, so you think that because you’ve rescued me I should just melt at your feet?”

He laughed. She didn’t like it. “I think you could at least be gracious. Don’t waste this opportunity, Catherine – our families are watching.”

“I don’t care,” she lied.

“Well, I do,” he said, the lightness gone. “And you will not embarrass us. Smile, dance, say the right things in the right places. If you genuinely have a problem with the arrangements made by your parents, then we will discuss that at the appropriate time. But you will not behave like a spoilt brat on the most important night of the season.”

“You speak as though we’re already married,” she said, now wanting to step on his toes but not managing to find them.

“As far as our social fortunes are concerned we are already tied,” he said. “We have to accept it and do our best.”

“I don’t–”

“You take yourself too seriously,” he cut in. “Treat this evening like a game and you’ll enjoy it so much more. I’ll even help you to play it. You don’t want to forfeit. Hell hath no fury like a father disappointed.”

His words chilled her into silence. They swept in circles about the floor as she concentrated on avoiding eye contact with the spectators. It was only as they were coming to the end of the dance that she realised he’d cast a Grace Charm on her. She didn’t know whether to be furious or grateful.

There was a spontaneous burst of applause as William brought them to an elegant finish. He bowed, she curtsied, he kissed her hand once more. Then the crowd closed in around them.

18

“There’s no hope for you, Catherine,” Elizabeth said in the carriage. “Lord Poppy’s gift was wasted on you. I can’t believe you were dressed in a magical ball gown, put in the middle of the ballroom and just stood there like a…like a…dying fish. Why, in the time it took William Iris to get to you I’d thought of a thousand witty or charming remarks that would have made that entrance perfect.”

“Well, I just happened to think of one intelligent remark when I was with Lord Poppy, and that counted for more,” Cathy snapped.

Her mother climbed into the carriage with the help of the footman, and then her father. It felt like the interior chilled by several degrees as he settled into place. The steps were folded up, the door shut and they were on their way.

“And everyone was looking at you, all evening,” Elizabeth continued. “Did you make any new friends? Did you secure any interesting invitations? No. Nothing. It’s so unfair! Mother, don’t you think so?”

“I think you could have at least pretended to be pleased,” Mother said, and Elizabeth nodded.

“You either looked sour or shell-shocked the whole evening. It was so embarrassing.”

“Yes, I found it very embarrassing,” Cathy said, doing her best to look out of the window so she didn’t have to look at her father. “Though I have no idea why *you* would find it so. I think the adjective you’re looking for is ‘jealous’.”

“Will you both be quiet,” Father rumbled and Elizabeth sank into a sulk.

“No one noticed my new gown, even though it was more fashionable than Imogen’s,” she whispered to Mother and then was silent for the rest of the journey.

Cathy’s feet were throbbing in time with her head. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d actually had a good night’s sleep. Losing a night and a day inflicted the same fuzzy-headed detachment as working through the night to get an essay in on time. Her body felt out of step with the social activity around her. Whilst there was a huge sense of relief now that the ordeal of the wishes and the ball was over, she wasn’t looking forward to getting home. Lucy had offered a room at their house, but her father had declined on her behalf. She was going to have to get used to people doing that.

It didn’t take long to get back to Great Pulteney Street and just the sight of it made her feel nauseous. She’d had nightmares about returning to the family home for weeks after she’d run away. Her only hope was that being a clear favourite of their patron would be enough to placate her father. They’d spent hours at the ball pretending that everything was normal, none of the family wanting anyone to guess it was the first time they’d seen her in almost three years.

Once they were in the house Elizabeth stamped up the stairs and disappeared behind a slammed bedroom door before her mother had even taken off her shoulder cape. Cathy looked down at the dress, still there, wondering how she was to take it off.

“Once you have changed, Catherine, come to my study,” her father said.

Her teeth started to chatter so she clamped her jaw tightly shut and went up the stairs, a maid she didn’t recognise following her silently.

Her room hadn’t been touched since the day she left, aside from being dusted. She glanced at the dolls on the shelves, the jewellery boxes, the attempts to give her a pretty girl’s bedroom, perhaps in the hope that the twee delicacy of it all would somehow rub off onto her.

It felt like it belonged to someone else.

The maid began to lay out the underwear and Cathy gazed at it in dismay. It looked like fancy-dress costume now, something for a re-enactors’ fair rather than everyday life. She’d got used to the ease of modern clothing and its practicality. She liked the fact that women could dress like men in Mundanus and no one batted an eyelid.

“It’s a marvellous dress, Miss Papaver,” the maid said once she was done. “However did you get into it?”

“Dresses like this are conjured up,” Cathy said, looking at the mirror. It was beautiful and really didn’t suit her. It made her look like a paper doll dressed incorrectly, as her head didn’t match the rest of her. She could see now why her hair felt strange; it was swept up and arranged in an elegant chignon held in place by tiny sprites. “I have no idea how to take it off,” she said, tugging experimentally at one of the petals and then all of them fell off, as if they’d never been a dress at all. The sprites disappeared and her hair tumbled about her shoulders as she covered herself as best she could.

The maid simply dropped the chemise over her head. Cathy remembered she needed to get used to being dressed instead of just chucking on the first thing she saw in the drawer. She resisted the urge to send the girl away, not wanting to make a fuss so soon after getting back home.

By the time they got to the corset she already felt fully dressed. She steeled herself for the constriction, knowing her waist had thickened thanks to the fast food she’d discovered in Mundanus. The maid was very polite

about the fact that she broke into a sweat getting the back to close. Cathy's ribs were already starting to ache.

"I'll speak to Mother about it," she said, wanting to spare the girl the embarrassment. She was helped into the simple gown that she used to wear before she went up to Cambridge and stared at herself as the maid did up the hooks and eyes at the back. Looking at herself neck downwards it was like nothing had changed, and if she wasn't careful she'd think her time in Mundanus with Josh was just a fantasy. But when she looked herself in the eye, she could hold on to the fact that she'd escaped once. Everything had changed, regardless of whether they laced her up into clothes that barely fit any more.

Her back was aching too by the time she reached the door of her father's study. She felt lightheaded; whether it was the adrenalin or the fact she was trying to remember how to breathe differently she wasn't sure, but she took a moment to ready herself before she knocked.

"Come in."

She went inside, and that one step over the threshold reduced her to the terrified thing she'd been in her adolescence. He was standing instead of sitting at his desk, never a good sign, and still dressed in his black tie from the ball. There was just as much grey at his temples as before and his black moustache still dominated his face. She couldn't look him in the eye so she glanced at the glass cabinets in the corners of the room, still full of military regalia from the First World War. Then her gaze fell on the silver-topped swagger stick held in its own display rack in pride of place on top of the desk. Within his reach.

"That was an impressive entrance this evening, Catherine," he finally said. "But it seems you still have a yen for putting your family through

unnecessary anxiety, even after Thomas managed to bring you back to Aquae Sulis.”

“I had no idea that was going to happen. I was waiting for the bath to be filled at Tom’s house and then Lord Poppy summoned me into Exilium. I swear it, Father.”

“That was yesterday evening.”

“Lord Poppy made it so I missed a night and a day and I don’t know how. He said time works differently there; it only seemed like half an hour to me.”

His pale-blue eyes scrutinised her closely and she looked down at the rug, knowing its pattern all too well. The room still smelt of wood panelling and the dusty books on the shelves filling three walls of the room. “It seems you have won his favour.”

“Yes, Father.”

“How?”

“It was the way I handled three wishes he gave me.”

“Why did he do that?”

“Because he’d heard about my coming-of-age request and was curious.”

“You have a lot of explaining to do. How did he find you?”

In a wavering voice, she told him about being found at the Emporium, doing her best to cover for the Shopkeeper by not explaining the arrangement with him. But once she’d started, he wanted to know what she’d wished for and her heart was banging so loud she feared he would hear it.

He tutted in disappointment when he heard how the first wish had fared, then she faltered as she came to the second, opting to say only that she’d lost her temper and a mundane had been caught in the wish magic by accident.

“Why were you making wishes on a street in Mundanus?” he asked, his right index finger tapping the corner of the desk.

“It got…complicated,” she managed to say. Then she had to explain what happened with the Rosa – neglecting to name him, having seen him in the ballroom earlier that evening – and how arguing her way out of responsibility had resulted in going to Londinium to save the mundane.

Then she realised she never should have started.

“Who was this mundane? Why did you care what happened to him when you knew you were required here?”

“He was my friend.”

“More than that, I fear,” he growled and went to one of the drawers of his desk. She gripped her dress, clenching the fabric in sweating fists as he took out a small velvet pouch. “Thomas has vouched personally for your virtue but I need to be certain.” He tipped an oval stone onto his palm; it looked like a milky opal. “This is what you have reduced me to, Catherine. I never thought I would have need of this. Now stand still.”

It took all of her self-control not to flinch from him as he pressed the stone against her breastbone. She had nothing to fear from any test of her virginity; his curse had done its job well enough. He watched the stone, which felt icy cold, and then removed it with obvious relief. It looked no different.

“What happened to the Rosa?” he asked, dropping it back into the pouch and returning it to the desk drawer.

“He was humiliated. That’s what impressed Lord Poppy and why I’m his favourite now.” She wanted to remind him; it was her only defence.

“And the third wish?”

She told him and he nodded. “I remember that one. Then he dressed you and pushed you through into the ballroom?”

“Yes, Father, that’s why I was so shocked. One minute I was in a bathrobe in Tom’s house, the next I was in a dress at the ball.”

His grim scrutiny continued. “I have no idea why you ran away, and I do not care to know. Needless to say, I am disgusted with your behaviour and will never trust you again. This is how it will be from now until your wedding day: you will not leave this house without my explicit permission and only then with a chaperone I have personally approved. You will not go into Mundanus. You will attend the social functions we deem necessary and you will behave impeccably. You will not discuss your time in Mundanus. As far as anyone is concerned you have been in Switzerland as was established to cover your time in Cambridge.”

As he spoke, she realised how little she cared about what he thought of her. Living in Mundanus and seeing the way their society had evolved without being under the control of the Fae had opened her eyes. He was a monstrous man, living in a monstrous society. She was determined not to forget that.

“Do you understand?”

“Yes, Father.”

“Thankfully your engagement has not been damaged by your frightful behaviour and I want to keep it that way. I will not discuss your history with the Irises and I expect you to follow my example. I’m pressing for the wedding to take place at the end of the season.”

“But that’s only six months!” she cried, horrified. How could she find a way out in such a short time?

“It would be six days if I had my way,” he said. “And you, ungrateful wretch, should be thankful that I have secured such a prestigious match considering how poorly you conducted yourself before you ran away, let alone in light of it.”

She choked back angry words, instead digging her fingernails into her palms. “I’m so sorry I have never lived up to your expectations.” She struggled to rein in the sarcasm. “At least I made our patron happy.”

“That is the only reason we are having this conversation,” he said through his teeth. “It was the only excuse that could have satisfied me. But it doesn’t undo the dreadful disregard you have demonstrated for your family, and it most certainly does not change my opinion of your character. Were this marriage to the Iris boy not critical, I would be tempted to disown you.” He let that hang between them for a moment. “Now, we must move forward.” He breathed out slowly, and she could see him trying to manage his temper as he paced back towards his desk. “In light of your success with Lord Poppy, I am willing to put your disgusting behaviour behind us, but only if you apologise.”

“Apologise?” She could feel him trying to push her back into an old role, one she was determined not to be trapped in again. “Hasn’t it occurred to you that *your* disgusting behaviour might have had something to do with why I ran away?”

“What did you say?” he roared.

“You know it isn’t right to beat your child just because she can’t sing a bloody song! I should have stuck up for myself a long time ago, then maybe–”

He swiped the stick off the desk so swiftly that its display rack was swept off, too. She brought her hands up instinctively. The first blow knocked her to the floor; the second, across her shoulder, made her screech and scrabble away from him, the full skirts of her dress tangling around her ankles. Her back hit a bookcase and he leant into the next blow, hitting her shoulders as she tried to curl into a ball.

There were two more blows to her arms that made her cry out and then the door banged open.

“Charles! You fool, stop that at once!”

Cathy still had her arms wrapped around her head, but through the gap between her elbows she could see the hem of her mother’s dress.

“This wilful brat needs discipline,” he shouted.

“This ‘wilful brat’ needs to be presentable in Society, not black and blue, you idiot. What would the Irises say if they saw a mark on her?”

She watched his feet move back, heard the clatter of the stick as it hit the desk. “Get her out of my sight,” he said, and she felt her mother’s arms working their way under hers, trying to get her onto her feet.

“Get up!” she hissed in her ear and Cathy struggled to comply, the pain making her whimper despite her efforts to hold it in.

She was steered out of the study and up the stairs. It was the first time her mother had intervened, and, whilst she was still reeling from the violence, a part of her was elated that not only had she stood up to her father at last, but her mother had too. Perhaps she had changed also, perhaps she’d thought about why her daughter had resorted to fleeing the family home and wished she’d protected her when she’d had the chance.

Her mother was silent all the way up to her room. She helped Cathy to the bed and turned to leave. “Thank you,” Cathy said, and her mother paused in the doorway.

“I didn’t do that for you,” she said, not turning around. “You deserve every one of those bruises for what you did to us. Just don’t let anyone else see them, or next time I won’t stop him.”

The door was slammed shut and then locked. Just like after he’d beaten her for reading the wrong kinds of books and admiring the wrong kinds of ideas. Then she realised that nothing had changed and there was no escape

and, just like before, she sobbed into the pillow as the welts burned their way to bruises.

19

Sam slapped his hand against his forehead.

“You forgot, didn’t you?”

Leanne’s hands were on her hips, her head tilted. It was her favourite position when she was about to launch into a prize rant.

“Sorry, love, I ran out of cash and the new cards haven’t arrived yet.”

“Did you chase the bank?”

“…No.”

“Why didn’t you ask me for some more?”

He shrugged and didn’t feel like he could say it was because he’d been trying to keep out of her way. She’d been prickly since she came home on the Friday night and he wasn’t certain he could do or say anything that wouldn’t make it worse.

“Oh, bloody hell, Sam! I ask you to get one thing – and it was alcoholic – and you still forgot!”

“It was this bump on the head!” he said, following his wife out of the dining room and into the kitchen. “I’ve been all over the place this week.”

“Give it a rest. You’ve only got that bump because you were off your face with Dave.”

“I was only at the pub because you were out. Again.”

“So it’s my fault you had so much you can’t even remember where you left your wallet?”

He backed off, not wanting the special night in to be ruined by another row. “We’ve got beer in the fridge,” he said, trying to slip his hands around

her waist as she stirred something on the stove.

She shoved his hands away and went to the sink. “Oh, we’re saved. I’m sure some cheap pilsner will really bring out the subtle flavours.”

He winced. She was getting sarcastic and that was a step up the danger scale from just being annoyed. After sarcastic was shouting, then it was tearful, then it was sleeping-on-the-sofa time.

“I’ll go to the shop now. I’ll be back before it’s ready, OK?” When she nodded he approached her cautiously and kissed the back of her neck. “Can I have a tenner?”

“Oh, for Christ’s sake.” She dried her hands and got out her handbag.

Sam looked up at the ceiling as she rummaged, feeling like a boy waiting for his pocket money. He hated it when they were like this.

He took the note silently, a twenty, and she went back to the cooker. “Get red, and not some cheap crap, OK?”

He saluted her. Bad move. He left the kitchen.

In the hallway, as he slipped his shoes on, he looked at the framed picture that used to be his favourite. It was a photograph of them together at university, when her hair was long and her clothes loose and floaty. His hair was tied back in a ponytail that was long gone. Now he had the short hair of a grown-up with the mortgage and nine-to-five job they both swore they’d never have. Leanne’s job was more than nine-to-five though, and since she’d swapped the bohemian look for the crisp suits and high heels of the corporate life, she’d tightened up, got thinner, less fun. He’d done his best to keep up by getting a challenging coding job at a start-up with prospects but he just couldn’t bring himself to go the whole hog and sell out completely like she had.

It was hard to believe the photo had been taken nine years ago and the friend who took it was now dead. That day had been perfect; they were

slightly pissed and laughing their arses off about Pete not knowing what a douchebag was. It was puerile but it still made him smile all these years later. The picture captured them holding onto each other, laughing so hard they could barely stand up. It reminded him that there was a time when they didn't fight constantly, a time when they seemed to be walking in step with each other, instead of in different directions.

He grabbed his keys and the phone rang. Please don't be Dave, he thought as he picked up. "Hello?"

"Oh. Is that Samuel?"

Sam banged his forehead against the door. "Yeah, is that Mr Neugent?"

"Yes." There was a long pause. "Is Leanne there?"

She came out of the kitchen. "Who is it?"

He slapped a hand over the mouthpiece. "Dave."

"It's Marcus, isn't it?"

"It's Saturday evening, for Christ's sake," Sam said as she took the phone.

"Hi, Marcus," she said in her phone voice. "Oh, it's charging, sorry. No, it's no problem, go ahead."

"Bollocks," Sam muttered and chucked his keys back in the pot on the hallway table. He went to the fridge, grabbed a beer and opened it.

"I need to go out." Leanne said from the door a minute later. "There's a big function on tonight and Marcus had someone else lined up to go but they've called in sick–"

"So he wants some other bird to hang off his arm?"

"I happen to be the assistant director of the EMEA region," Leanne said, storming over to the oven to switch off the hob. "Not just some bit of skirt to wheel out for the clients. Bloody hell, you just can't accept that I have a career, can you?"

“Bollocks! What I can’t accept is how that arsehole runs your life. It’s Saturday night! This was supposed to be a special night in and now you’re just going to drop everything to go and laugh at his jokes and look pretty for the fat businessmen there who don’t give a shit about how clever you are.”

“‘Special night in’? Says the man who couldn’t even be bothered to buy a bottle of wine?”

“I forgot!”

She pushed past him, heading for the stairs. “That says it all, doesn’t it? And now when I have to go to work, you get on the high horse. You can’t have it both ways.”

“Go to work? You’re off to some swanky hotel aren’t you? You’re gonna be drinking wine and eating canapés and making Marcus feel like he’s got a bigger dick than everyone else, when, let’s face it, he *is* the biggest dick in the room.”

“It all comes down to dicks for you, doesn’t it?” she was marching into the bedroom now. “You just can’t handle the fact that I have some direction in my life. It isn’t my fault you don’t know what you’re doing with yours!”

“I thought I was being married to you,” he said and she stopped.

“We just want different things,” she said. “If you don’t want to be a high flyer, can’t you at least support me?”

“Not if being a high flyer means you spend more time with that cock than with your own husband.”

She groaned and went to the wardrobe. “Has it ever occurred to you that I might like to spend time with ambitious, dynamic people?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing.” She pulled a dress off a hanger and started to take her jeans off.

“So you’re saying you prefer to see him than me? Is that what this is really about?”

“No, for God’s sake, Sam, just…just let me get ready will you?”

“Are you sleeping with him?”

She froze, one foot in the jeans, one foot out. “What did you just say?”

“I was just wondering how ambitious you are. Are you shagging your boss?”

He saw the tears well and felt awful. The balloon of anger inside him popped.

“You know what? I’m going to stay at the hotel tonight. I don’t want to come back here.”

“Lee, I’m sorry, I’m a twat.”

“Then you can lie there,” she pointed at the bed, “thinking about whether I’m shagging Marcus and why on earth I may well want to do that! Now sod off and let me get ready!”

She pushed him out of the bedroom and slammed the door in his face. “Lee,” he called through it but she didn’t reply. “Leanne, I’m sorry.”

“Piss off, Sam.”

“I didn’t mean–”

“Piss off!”

He banged the door with his palm. “Fine!”

He went back downstairs, took another forty out of her purse and threw on his jacket. Keys grabbed, he banged the door as loud as he could as he left.

By the time he got to the pub he’d worked himself into the perfect amount of self-righteousness to get completely slaughtered. It wasn’t his fault, it was Marcus.

“Pint, please,” he said to the landlord.

“Argument with the missus again?”

“It’s her prick of a boss,” Sam said, passing over the first of the notes, wondering whether he could get drunk on sixty quid. “Honestly, I’m royally fucked off with it all, you know?”

“Yup.”

“We were supposed to be having a night in, then he calls and it’s all out the window.”

“Yup.” The pint was set down, Sam took a long drink and pulled out his mobile to text Dave.

The reply was quick enough. “Sorry m8 at wedding free wine free beer nuff said.”

“Bollocks,” Sam muttered and took the pint over to a table to nurse it by himself.

The place was starting to fill up. Halfway through the second beer a hen party came in, all feather boas and raucous laughter. Sam sank lower in his chair, worried that a miserable bloke on his own would just be impossible for them not to ridicule.

“Excuse me.”

A damn ugly man holding a trilby and wearing a dodgy raincoat was standing in front of him. He looked like a noir fan who took it too far.

“Samuel James Westonville?”

“…Yeah.”

The man sat down, dropped the hat onto the table. “I have your wallet.” He pushed it across the table.

“Blimey!” Sam opened it. The cards were still there and more money than he remembered too. “You’re an honest bloke, thanks. Let me buy you a drink!”

“Orange juice, please,” the man said, pointing at a bust leg. “The painkillers don’t agree with whisky.”

Sam got the drink and went back to the table. “Where did you find my wallet?”

“I wanted to talk to you about that,” the man said.

Something about this guy wasn’t quite right. “Who did you say you are again?”

“I didn’t. My name is Max. I’m a private investigator.”

Sam nearly choked on his beer. “You’re shitting me.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“A private investigator, eh?” Sam hurried on, seeing that the guy had no sense of humour. With a face like that it was no surprise. “Is that how you found me?”

“I saw you leave your house and followed you here.”

That spooked him. “OK. How did you know where I live?”

“It’s printed on your driving licence.”

“Oh. Yeah. OK.”

“So, Mr Westonville, I found your wallet in the grounds of the Holburne Museum, which is currently at the centre of my investigation.”

“You did? How the arse did it get there?”

Max stared at him. “You don’t remember being there?”

Sam shook his head.

“When did you realise your wallet was missing?”

“Tuesday morning, on the way to work. I thought I’d lost it at the pub round the corner. That’s near the museum actually. I was a bit worse for wear, woke up with a sore head. But it wasn’t at the pub when I checked. I don’t remember going into the museum though. It would have been closed by then.”

“It was in the grounds.”

Sam shrugged. “Sorry, mate, no idea how it got there.”

“Could it have been stolen?”

“Maybe.”

“So you were at the pub on Monday evening?”

“I…yes, I must have been.”

The detective leaned forwards. “You don’t remember? Think carefully. It’s very important, Mr Westonville. What was the last thing you recall about Monday night?”

“I was at work…I met up with Dave, he’s my best mate and we were planning to have a couple of jars.”

“Jars?”

“Beers. I wouldn’t normally on a Monday night but my wife called and said she was going to be home late and then up, up and away, Mary had a little lamb its fleece was white as goosey goosey gander, where shall I–”

Max held his hand up as Sam blinked at the beer. “Let’s go over that last part again, Mr Westonville.”

“Call me Sam, please,” he said after another drink. He placed his palms flat on the table. “OK. So…Leanne called and I was a bit pissed off with her so I twinkle, twinkle little star, how I sing a song of sixpence, a pocket full of rye!”

He clamped a hand over his mouth, sucking in deep breaths through his nose. “What the fuck is in this beer?” he said once he’d stopped, pushing it away from him.

“Mr – Sam, I need to ask you a few more questions, but we need to talk in private. Would you come with me, please?”

Sam looked at him with a raised eyebrow. “I want to see some ID first.” Nothing about the way the man acted made Sam want to be anywhere

private with him.

“I’m afraid I don’t have any you’d recognise.”

“Well then, sorry, but no. No offence, but you could be anyone. Thanks for bringing my wallet back. I’ll buy you another drink if you like, but if it’s all the same to you, I’m going to stay here, in a public place.” He glanced at the beer. “And I’m going to move off the beer and onto spirits.”

“I understand,” Max said, standing up. He didn’t seem offended. “Have a good evening, Mr Westonville.”

Sam leant back in the chair watching the PI leave. He wondered whether he should just go home, but the thought of returning to an empty house with a failed romantic dinner half cooked in the oven made him miserable. He flipped through his wallet, double-checking everything was there, then ordered a whisky. Sam smirked at the memory of Max, glad to have the wallet back and well on the way to drunken oblivion, judging by his fuzzy head and the gobbledegook he’d spoken.

The hen party left, the regulars got more drunk, and one of Leanne’s favourite songs came on the jukebox. Just as he was sinking into the maudlin phase, berating himself for losing his temper with her, he saw a slender hand rest on the back of the chair opposite.

“Do you mind if I sit here?”

The blonde looked like she had stepped out of a movie. She was too beautiful for his local pub; her blonde hair shone despite the dingy lighting, her lips were deep red and eminently kissable.

“Um…no,” he said. “Are you waiting for someone?”

She smiled, and it made him want to rest his chin on the table and drool. “Looking for someone,” she said.

She was wearing an old-fashioned suit and it reminded him of the detective for some reason, though through the lust and drunken fog he

couldn’t work out why.

“Anyone in particular?”

“A man.”

“A particular man?”

“Someone to keep me company.”

He swallowed. This was the moment he’d dreamt of all his teenage years. Then he thought of Leanne. He looked down at the table, feeling a pang of guilt.

“It’s just that I need to walk home, and I don’t like walking alone at night.”

“I suppose I could do that,” he said.

“If it’s not too much trouble?”

He shook his head. It was a bit weird, but he wasn’t going to do anything contrary to what a married man should. Even so, it felt dangerous.

“Thank you so much,” she said, standing as he struggled with his jacket, trying not to sway. “I was hoping a friend would meet me but he didn’t show.”

He’s a pillock, Sam thought, necking the last of the whisky. “Do you live very far away?”

“Not too far. Too close for a taxi and too far to walk it alone at night.”

“My name’s Sam, by the way.”

She smiled again. He had an urge to keep finding ways to make her do that, and he struggled to repress it. “I’m Petra. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

20

As his valet tied his cravat, Will prepared himself for the meeting ahead. To everyone else it was a candlelit dinner with his fiancée, but to him it was simply business negotiations with a difficult party.

Catherine Papaver was proving to be tougher to win over than he'd thought. For any other woman in Aquae Sulis – no, the entirety of Nether Society – being the belle of the ball would have been a dream come true. Not for her. They would have been delighted to have been treated like the most beautiful woman in the world by a son of a powerful family, soon to be husband. But for Catherine it simply wasn't enough.

Every time he had complimented her it was thrown back in his face. Every time he danced with her and gave her the opportunity to win the admiration of her peers, she rejected him, and made no effort to engage in small talk. She'd wasted an incredible opportunity to be launched onto the Aquae Sulis social circuit.

He'd been convinced that making a plain woman feel admired would win her over; after all, wouldn't that be what she'd want the most? Especially after all those years in her younger sister's shadow. Elizabeth was one of the beauties of her generation and made her pretty peers look plain.

When he'd got back from the ball, exhausted by his efforts, he'd doubted whether it was worth the trouble. It wasn't as if her dislike of him would jeopardise their marriage; the engagement contracts had already been signed by their fathers. But a woman in love was so much easier to keep in

line. With the alliance between the families being so critical, it made sense to try to make the marriage as successful as possible. Her being a surprise favourite of Lord Poppy meant Catherine's favour could have other benefits. He decided to persevere. Besides, he'd never shied away from a challenge.

"Is there anything else I can do for you, sir?"

"No, thank you, Jones," Will replied, inspecting himself in the mirror. "I think a cape and cane for this evening if–"

The door opened without a warning knock and Will took a breath to berate the intruder for such poor manners. But then he saw Sophia standing in the doorway, sniffing.

"What is it?" he asked, bending down onto one knee and opening his arms to her.

She ran into them. "Imogen said I'll be sent away into Mundanus forever!"

He chuckled. "No, just until you're all grown up. That's what happened to all of us. When you're a nice young lady, you'll move out of the nursery wing in Mundanus and into the main house in the Nether with us all the time, that's all. If you stayed in the Nether, you'd never grow up."

She pulled back, her bottom lip wobbling. "No, Will-yum," she said, tears rolling down her cheeks. "Imogen said I'll be left in a wood and wolves will eat me up because there's only allowed to be three children."

"Take no notice of her," he said, kissing her forehead. Even though he'd only been home for three days, he was already quite fond of the strange little thing. He'd never known such an affectionate child. "I know a secret, would you like me to share it with you?"

She forgot about her misery in a moment, nodding eagerly as the tears dried on her cheeks.

“Cook has made me some custard tarts as a special treat, but she hasn’t told anyone else. Would you like to have one?”

She nodded, making the gentle ringlets bounce on her shoulders. “Yes, please.”

“Jones will show you the way. Go on now, I have to go out for dinner with the young lady I’m going to marry.”

“Can I be a bridesmaid?”

“If Mother says so, yes. Go on now.”

She squeezed him tight and kissed his cheek, then extended her hand to Jones, who looked at it awkwardly for a moment before taking hold and walking out of the room with her.

When she was downstairs, he went to Imogen’s room and rapped on the door.

“Come in.”

Imogen was seated at her dressing table, holding a necklace up against her dress.

“Is it true you told Sophia she’d be eaten by wolves?”

“I may have said something along those lines.”

“You really are a heartless specimen, aren’t you?”

“She broke my favourite bracelet.”

“She’s only three!”

“She’s almost four and should know better. Besides, there should only be three of us, everyone knows that.”

“Everyone?”

“Everyone important. Why do you think we’re not allowed to talk about her outside the house? Why do you think the housemaid is looking after her in Mundanus and not a nanny from the Agency? Father is embarrassed and

if the Patroon finds out, that's it." She twisted around to face him. "Don't get attached to her, Will. She shouldn't be here."

"How can you speak like that about a little girl?"

She rolled her eyes. "I'm just pragmatic."

"Pathetic more like, upsetting a child because she broke a bracelet when you have dozens of the things. Besides, I don't know of any such rule. Father only has one brother."

"Don't you know anything? They had a sister but she died of a fever when she was small." She spoke as if it were common knowledge. "Where are you going dressed up like that?"

"I'm meeting Catherine for dinner," he replied, adjusting his collar, wondering what else he didn't know about his family.

"Why on earth would you want to do that? You'll be seeing her every day soon enough."

"Call me a fool, as you doubtless will, but I thought it would be wise to at least try to get to know the woman I'll be married to by the end of the season."

"You are a fool. I'd make the most of your freedom whilst you can and have dinner with someone pleasant to look at instead." She dropped the necklace into her lap, frowning. "By the end of the season? That's rather quick, isn't it?"

He shrugged. "Is it?"

"They want to palm her off onto you as soon as they can. Don't forget what I told you, William. She's trouble."

"Have a good evening playing with your baubles," he said. "Do try not to traumatise any other small children."

He closed her door and headed for the stairs, hearing voices in the lobby below. He recognised his Uncle Vincent's low rumble instantly.

“How is she?”

“Fine, Vincent, absolutely fine.”

His mother was talking to him, but something about her voice made him slow down and peep over the handrail. Uncle Vincent was in his coat and hat and Mother was looking up at him, standing closer than Will imagined she would be. The way they looked at each other made him uncomfortable, but then he pulled himself up. They’d known each other for decades, of course they were close.

“Uncle Vincent!” he called as he descended the stairs. “How are you?”

“Fine, Will m’boy.”

“Join me for a drink at the club later?”

“I’ll do my best.”

“Have a nice evening, dear,” Mother said, coming over to peck him on the cheek.

He smiled at her, but was still unnerved when he climbed into the carriage. She never used to do that. He adjusted his gloves and tried to think ahead to the dinner and what he would talk to Catherine about, but his mind kept returning to the way his mother had been standing so close to his uncle. He shook his head and looked out of the window, forgetting momentarily that there was no scenery to take him out of his thoughts. He felt a longing for greenery and for a changing sky, for women who laughed in the tumbling foam of Sicilian waves, and for salt on his lips that tasted like freedom.

Catherine looked very different at the restaurant. Will realised how much of a difference Lord Poppy’s gift had made. She was pale, appeared more tired than she should and was wearing a most austere outfit, something he’d

expect from his grandmother's generation. She was helped out of the carriage by her brother. There seemed to be some tension between them but Thomas Papaver was much better at hiding his feelings than she.

"Good evening," Will said, shaking him by the hand.

"Good evening, William," Thomas replied as Cathy lurked nearby.

She was doing her best to distance herself, even to the extent that she stood apart from them and was looking away as they shook hands. Her manners were abominable and her lack of social grace was second only to her lack of physical grace. Imogen was right; they were trying to palm her off and he could see why.

"Good evening," he said and she jumped slightly, as if she'd been daydreaming.

"Hi," she said as Thomas cleared his throat loudly. "Good evening," she added hurriedly and extended a gloved hand towards him which he kissed dutifully.

"Shall we?" He gestured to the restaurant and offered her his arm.

"I will be at the table in the corner," Thomas said and took his leave.

The restaurant was quite full, it being the season, catering for guests in Aquae Sulis as well as residents before they went on to whichever social event they had slated for the evening. They were seated at a reserved table in one of the most private nooks, drawing attention as they walked past the diners and leaving a wash of whispers in their wake.

Will inspected the wine list as the waiter brought the menus. It gave them both something to do for a minute, for which he was grateful. "What will you have?"

"The steak."

"Medium or well-done?"

"Bloody," she said, looking him right in the eye.

“Really?” He laid his menu down and the waiter took the cue. It was one of the minor advantages of being an Iris in Aquae Sulis; they always had the best service.

“Rare steak for my fiancée,” he began as she was taking a breath. He gave the rest of the order with the distinct impression he’d offended her. The waiter collected the menus and hurried off. “That was what you wanted?”

“I could have spoken for myself,” she replied.

He sat back and looked at her, puzzled. Her eyes were a pleasant pale blue, quite attractive with brown hair usually, but hers was too mousy and noncommittal in colour to be as striking as her sister. Her lips were a little thin, her nose inoffensive enough; it was more the sour expression that never seemed to leave her face that gave the impression of ugliness. “Is that what they’re teaching in Swiss finishing schools now?”

The flush in her cheeks helped her complexion. She shut her eyes, as if readying herself for an exam rather than dinner.

“Sorry,” she said finally, opening her eyes but not looking at him. Instead she started to fiddle with her napkin in a most irritating manner.

“So,” he said, leaning forward again, determined to make the best of it. “I thought it would be beneficial to discuss the future in a setting more conducive to conversation.”

“What’s to discuss? It’s a fait accompli, isn’t it?”

She said it with such heaviness he didn’t know how to respond. “The contracts are settled, yes; it doesn’t mean there isn’t anything to talk about.” When she just stared down at the napkin he sighed. “Catherine, I’m not an ogre. I really do want this to be a success.”

“That’s a contradiction in terms,” she muttered. “Look, I know you mean well, but really, there’s no point. We don’t want to marry each other. It

doesn’t matter how much you decorate a dog turd, it still smells of–”

She put a gloved hand over her mouth. He didn’t know whether to laugh or be shocked. “What an interesting turn of phrase,” he commented as the wine was brought over. He tasted and approved it as she blazed scarlet. Once the wine was poured he picked up his glass, briefly considered a toast, but decided against it and took a long draught instead. “I know how you feel and I’m aware of your poor regard. You do little to hide it.”

A flash of guilt crossed her face. She was as easy to read as Sophia. “Oh, I’m sorry,” she said, genuinely. “It’s nothing personal, really, I swear it. You’re very handsome and rich and all of that stuff. Anyone else would be delighted.”

“Well, I feel so much better,” he said with a wry raise of an eyebrow, which seemed to soften her a little. “Why aren’t you?”

“I don’t think that’s a conversation we should have.”

“I have the distinct impression that there is a lot you want to say but feel you can’t.”

She looked at him then, maintaining eye contact longer than ever before. “You don’t know the half of it.”

“That’s what I’m trying to say. Talk to me, Catherine. Tell me how we can make this more bearable. Is there anything specific about being married to me that upsets you?”

“Apart from–” She cut herself off again, dropping her head as she appeared to struggle with herself. She glanced over towards where her brother was sitting and her shoulders sagged.

It was a risk, but he decided to take it. He reached across the table and took her hand gently. “I won’t report anything you say to another soul.”

She was shaking, seeming more like a prisoner on the scaffold facing a noose rather than a woman of privilege facing her fiancé. “I don’t like life

in the Nether," she eventually said.

"I see," he said, keeping hold of her hand, feeling its slight dampness at the palm of the glove. "Have you been back to Mundanus since you came of age?"

She laughed, not a gentle, ladylike titter, but a guffaw that made the diners closest to them look over. She bit her lip and nodded.

"I must confess, I miss the sunshine," he said, and was rewarded with the first genuine smile he'd ever seen on her face.

"And the blue sky. And the breeze, don't you? And those crisp autumn days."

He nodded, heartened by the breakthrough. "I even miss the rain. In the Amazon, the rain was thunderous on our tents."

"You went to the Amazon?"

"Yes. We trekked for a couple of months. Oliver wanted to catch a moth or a butterfly. Something small and winged at least. I forget what exactly."

The flurry of conversation stalled and she withdrew her hand awkwardly. In fact, almost everything she did was riddled with awkwardness. He was determined to keep some of the momentum. "If you could visit Mundanus, would it make the marriage more bearable?"

She shrugged. "I suppose. Visiting isn't the same as…" Another abrupt stop. He had the feeling he was only hearing ten per cent of what was on her mind.

"But it's better than nothing. Perhaps you just need to get it out of your system. How about a weekend there as part of the honeymoon?"

"A whole weekend," she replied sarcastically.

"Most husbands would not be so generous," he snapped, irritated by her unladylike retort.

“There you are with the gratitude thing again.” She shook her head. “You throw me a bone and hope I’ll sit up and do nice tricks for you.”

The waiter arrived with the food before he could reply. There were a few minutes of silent eating and he used them to consider his approach.

“I’m starting to think there isn’t anything I can say to you that will make you feel better about this,” he said.

She was pushing a potato around her plate. “I think you’re right.”

“This is how I see it.” He laid his knife and fork down, sipped the wine. “I have done everything I can to open a dialogue with you. I used a powerful Charm to help you at the ball, I did everything I could to make you look good.”

“Only so you would look good,” she muttered, but he ignored it.

“I’ve given you the opportunity to discuss any grievances or concerns you may have and I’ve attempted to offer a solution. Every single time you’ve either ridiculed, scorned or even been offended by my efforts and I have no idea why. It seems to me you’re determined to be miserable about this marriage and if that’s the case, there’s nothing I can say or do about it. So, you have a choice.”

“Oh, really?”

“Sarcasm is not becoming in a lady.”

“Spare me.”

He clenched his jaw, aware of the diners around them. “Your choice is to continue to be rude and obstructive and marry a stranger with little regard for your feelings, or to meet me halfway and be gracious enough to see that an improvement in your behaviour will make the rest of our lives much more pleasant.”

Cathy blanched, but remained silent, simply staring down at the meal she’d barely touched.

“You have a lot to think about. In the meantime I’ll tell you about the Amazon so that the people watching us will think we are actually having a conversation. I strongly suggest that by the soirée at the Peonias’ house tomorrow evening you will have something more positive to say to me.”

“Is there no way to avoid this marriage?”

“No,” he replied firmly and picked up his cutlery again.

She sat in silence as he trotted out a tale from his Grand Tour and she barely responded to his jokes. Occasionally he asked her a direct question so she would be forced to interact with him for the sake of appearances. He decided against dessert.

“I know I’m upsetting you,” she said as he dabbed his mouth with the napkin. “I can’t tell you why I’m like this and you were right – there is nothing you can do or say. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry, Catherine,” he said, standing up to pull her chair out as she stood too. “Just be civil. It’s not too much to ask.”

He escorted her out of the restaurant, Thomas joining them outside. She looked close to tears as she was helped into a hansom cab and her brother made an embarrassed goodbye for the both of them.

He pulled on his gloves, cane tucked under his arm as he waited for another cab.

“Good evening, Mr Reticulata-Iris.”

He turned at the voice, not placing it immediately. Horatio Gallica-Rosa had emerged from the restaurant and was making his way towards him.

“Good evening.”

“I’m planning to go to the club. Is that where you’re heading?”

Will paused. It was members only. “Yes.”

“Oliver has sponsored me in,” Horatio replied, seeing the momentary confusion. “Would you like to share a cab?”

“Thank you, yes,” Will replied, even though it was the last thing he wanted.

Soon enough one came round the corner and they both climbed in after Horatio instructed the driver.

“How was dinner with Miss Papaver?”

“Very pleasant,” Will lied.

“I was most interested to see the announcement of your engagement last night,” Horatio said. “I take it you don’t know about Miss Papaver.”

“Know what, exactly?” Will said, hackles up. He didn’t like his tone.

“Ah.” Horatio inspected a stitch on his glove. “Well, it’s fortunate we ran into each other like this. Permit me to give you a word of advice, Mr Iris. If I were you, I would call off the engagement as soon as possible.”

“And why would I do that?”

“Because Miss Papaver, as the more astute of us may have noticed last night, has not spent the last three years at a Swiss finishing school. She’s been living in Mundanus, in the dark city of Manchester, I believe.”

“Whatever gives you that idea?” Will asked, playing it calm, nonchalant.

“Only the fact that I intercepted her and her brother on a mundane road out of the city a few days ago. She was dressed as a mundane, her brother clearly had little idea of what she’d been up to in recent times and her behaviour was reprehensible. Of course, that isn’t the main reason I wouldn’t marry her for all the tea in China.”

He was drawing it out, hoping to make him squirm. Will remained glacial, not wanting to give him the pleasure. “It can’t be because of her taste in clothes.”

Horatio chuckled. “Indeed, no, it’s because she was obviously having an affair with a mundane, someone she went out of her way to protect from my

wrath. Which is the reason our paths crossed. Of course, you are entirely free to ignore my advice."

"Are you certain about the mundane?"

"Oh, yes." His wolfish smile made Will want to hit him. "I know what a woman in love looks like. And I didn't see that this evening. Oh, and there is, of course, the evidence from my patron that linked her directly with the misdemeanour that brought about these revelations." He flicked a speck of dust from his trouser leg. "Evidence enough, I fear."

"Indeed," Will said, grateful that the carriage was stopping outside the club so he didn't have to share it a moment longer with the odious man. "I will consider your advice carefully."

"Not much to consider, old chap," Horatio said, stepping out first. "I'm just pleased I had the opportunity to save you from the embarrassment. A secret like this always comes out, one way or another. Wouldn't you agree?"

21

“It’s just at the end of this street,” Petra said, and slipped her hand into the crook of Sam’s arm. “So what do you do for a living?”

“I’m a computer programmer. You?”

“I’m a librarian. I don’t know a thing about computers.”

“Really? Don’t all libraries have them now?”

“Not the one I work in. The owner is very traditional. It’s a private library.”

Sam nodded and smiled at Petra. She was so much warmer than his wife. Then his smile faded. Don’t think about Leanne, he urged himself, she’s off having the time of her life with that evil dick of a boss.

“Is something wrong?”

“No, no.”

She stopped outside a set of gates leading up to a huge house. “This is it.”

Amazed, he scanned the frontage with its stone pillars, impressive triangular pediment and the elegant fountain at the centre of the circular drive. It was Georgian and worth millions. He’d never been into a house that grand without having to pay for a ticket beforehand. “You live here?”

She nodded. “Would you like to come in for a nightcap?”

He hesitated, not sure what to say. “No” would be impolite but “yes” seemed like the first step towards infidelity.

“I hate going into the house by myself. I know it’s silly, but it’s the dark.”

“Um, OK, I’ll see you in, then I need to go home.”

“Of course.”

He followed her up the drive as she got her keys out of her bag. “I’m really grateful for this,” she said, putting the key in the lock and turning it. She opened the door, but bent down to straighten the seam of her stocking before she stepped into the house. Eyes glued to her shapely legs, he stumbled in after her, trying not to imagine the tops of the stockings. She closed the door behind him, smiling in a way that almost made him forget he was married.

She guided him into a spacious living room, lit several large candles on the mantelpiece and pointed to one of a couple of sofas in the middle. “Take a seat, I’ll get us a drink.”

“But I should really…” He began, but she left. “…get home.”

He looked around the room. It was cluttered and old-fashioned and there was a hearty fire burning in the grate. He frowned at it. She couldn’t have been out that long. Or maybe there was someone else in the house, but if that were the case, why had she asked him in? He decided it was time to leave, impolite or not.

Before he reached the door Petra returned with two glasses of whisky, followed in by a tall, thin man dressed in an old-fashioned tweed suit and the private detective from the pub.

“What’s going on?” he asked as she handed him a glass.

“Sorry,” she said. “We really need to talk to you.”

“Bollocks,” he muttered. “I knew something was wrong with all this.”

He put the whisky down, not trusting it. The tall man was staring at him in a way that made him edgy.

“This is the one?” he asked Max.

“Yes, sir.”

“I see,” said the tall man and walked out again.

“Who’s that bloke?”

“He owns this house,” Petra replied as Max hobbled to a sofa and eased himself down.

“I suppose you’re not a librarian either.”

“That was true.” She looked offended. “I wouldn’t lie about something as important as that.”

“So is the tweedy guy your husband?”

“No, my boss.”

He came back in, but about a dozen other men followed him into the room, each one of them stranger than the last. Not one wore anything resembling modern clothing; their suits looked like costume from a range of historical films. All carried notebooks and pencils.

“Is there some sort of weirdo convention in town?” No one answered him. “Look, I was happy to answer your questions in the pub but this is taking the piss.”

“Good evening,” the tall man said before turning to Petra. “I haven’t the faintest idea what he was just talking about. I take it he’s comfortable?”

“He’s just a little annoyed at being brought here under false pretences,” she explained.

“Hello, I’m right here,” Sam said.

“Hello, yes, I understand you lost your wallet,” the tall man said, speaking slowly as if he were talking to a child. “And when Max asked you about the night you lost it, you spoke rather strangely.”

“Yeah,” Sam said, glaring at Max. “Is he your boss too?”

“Yes,” Max replied. “We think you might be a witness, but you can’t tell us what you saw because something has been done to you.”

“Maximilian!” The boss held up his finger. “No more, I want my students to work this out for themselves. But first…”

He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a magnifying glass unlike any Sam had ever seen before. The large circular lens was held in an ornate brass frame, engraved and decorated elaborately. He moved closer, holding it up towards Sam.

“I’m not going to stay here and be treated like a bloody lab rat! You lot are mental, I’m off!”

He headed for the hall but something stepped in the doorway that looked disturbingly like a big gargoyle. “Sorry, mate, can’t let you go anywhere.”

He yelled and jumped back. “What fuckery is this?”

“Hardly subtle,” the boss said to Max, as if he had something to do with it.

The detective just shrugged. “I didn’t tell it to do that.”

“Just stand still, there’s a good chap,” the boss said.

“Bugger off!” Sam said, tripping over the edge of the rug in his fluster.

“Sam,” Petra said, setting her drink down and coming over to him. “We’re so sorry to upset you like this, we don’t often have guests like you.”

“What, normal?”

She smiled. “In a manner of speaking.” She touched his arm and he thought of her stockings again. Sometimes he hated his brain. “If you could just bear with us for a few minutes. Mr Ekstrand is going to see if something has been done to you, to stop you talking about what happened the other night.”

“I don’t give a rat’s arse about what happened.”

“But a man is missing, Sam. He might have been murdered and you’re the only one who might’ve seen something.” Her voice was so soft, so

soothing he almost forgot about the boss and the other crazies. “It won’t take long, we need you to be brave. Can you do that for us? For me?”

Somewhere at the back of his mind he knew she was playing him, but he found himself capitulating all the same.

She nodded to her boss who came closer and inspected him with the magnifying glass, slowly and methodically looking at every square inch of his head and shoulders and then down his arms. He paused over the wedding ring. “Very interesting,” he muttered, and then carried on. When he was finished, he stood back and peered at Sam in the same way a man might peer at an exotic insect kept in a glass tank. “Tell me about the night you lost your wallet.”

Sam looked over at the detective, expecting him to chip in, but the ugly man just nodded to him.

“I went to the pub on the way home from work and half a pound of tuppenny rice, half a pound of treacle.” He squeezed his eyes shut, certain that wasn’t what he meant to say. “No, hang on, he had ten thousand men. He marched them up to the top of the – oh, sod it!”

The boss turned and looked at the group that had followed the detective in, all of whom had pencils poised and were shuffling closer. “What could cause that sort of behaviour?”

“A Charm, sir!” a young and gangling lad said eagerly.

“Of course, which one?”

“A Fool’s Charm sir!”

“Good, good. What else?”

“But that’s the most likely, sir,” said another, who was sweating profusely.

“A good sorcer–”

Petra coughed loudly, distracting him. He glanced at Sam and frowned, nodding to himself.

“Err, it’s always better to be thorough. Other lines of enquiry could be…?”

The first shoved his hand in the air. “May I ask the subject a question, sir?”

“Subject?” Sam said, offended, but none of them seemed to notice.

“By all means, yes, you may ask,” the boss replied.

“Did you sustain any injuries on the night in question?”

“I had a bump on my head when I woke up the next morning.”

“Ooh!” The eager one bounced on his toes. “It could just be a head injury, sir!”

“Interesting point, good. How do we rule that out?”

They stood chewing the ends of their pencils for a few moments. “Ask him how many fingers you’re holding up?” one at the back said hopefully, earning an irritated groan from their teacher.

“Perhaps I can offer a suggestion?” Petra said, and they all looked at her. “We need to know where the bump is.”

“It’s here,” Sam said, brushing the back of his head. He wondered whether to make a dash for the window.

“That disproves the head injury theory,” she said. “The visual cortex is at the back of the brain so none of the language centres would be affected, and besides, his symptom only presents when he tries to recall the event. It’s not Tourette’s either,” she added as the sweaty one took another breath. “That’s completely different.”

“You are just a librarian, right?” Sam asked.

“I do actually read some of the books too.”

“Any other possibilities?” the boss said. “I can think of one and whoever names it may read a book in my library. As long as you don’t remove it. And you can’t touch any on the shelves down the lefthand wall. And not any books that begin with P, S or W.” When no one said anything he sighed. “Are we certain he is actually speaking gibberish?”

“Oh!” Eagerboy, as Sam now thought of him, leapt in the air. “It could be a variant of an Apollo’s Curse sir! He might be speaking the truth in his mind, but the curse may be acting on everyone around him so he can’t be believed.”

The suggestion was met with a nod from his teacher and then a variety of congratulatory grunts and pats on the back from his bizarre peers.

“Yes, that’s the only other possibility. But there is an obvious way to disprove this. What is it?” He didn’t give them as long that time. “Because the Arbiter heard the gobbledegook too, and as you all know, Arbiters are immune to–”

Petra coughed again.

“…immune to coughs and colds,” the man said, eliciting a number of confused expressions.

“Is this some kind of school?” Sam asked. “Will someone just please tell me what the arse is going on here?”

“You were in the wrong place at the wrong time, I think,” Petra said, rubbing his arm gently. “Weren’t you at all worried that you couldn’t remember that night?”

“Well, I was, but then my mate had just about convinced me it was cause I’d been on a bender.”

“Do they all talk like him in Mundanus?” the boss asked the detective, who nodded. “Well, I’m confident it’s a Fool’s Charm, though with the way

he talks it's hard to tell when he's talking about that night or just spouting rubbish."

"Oi!"

"So, putting this hypothesis together with the fact that he was in the vicinity of a serious incident involving foul play, I'm happy to press on with treating him as a victim of the Fool's Charm. Now, we also have reason to believe that the individuals involved are actually…" He glanced at Petra who was shaking her head at him. "Ah. Yes, that they are of the highest status amongst the criminal fraternity who live on the other side of the… divide, so to speak." He winked at his students theatrically.

"Do you mean one of the Fae lords, sir?" Eagerboy asked and Petra tutted.

"Did he just say–"

"Shush," Petra said to Sam, patting his arm again.

"That being said, I think there's only one option. We need to dislocate his soul and then interrogate him whilst we can. As you all know, their Charms only work on the soul and–"

"Now wait just a cocking moment!" Sam interjected. "Look, Mr… Ekhart?"

"Ekstrand. Mr Ekstrand."

"Look, Mr Ekstrand, I haven't got a scooby what you lot are on about, but when people start talking about dislocating souls, it puts the shits up me. That just doesn't sound natural."

Ekstrand took a moment to reply, as if he was still working out what he'd said. "Some very naughty people," he began, in his talking-to-a-child voice, "have done something very bad to your head. They are very powerful naughty people, so we have to do something very serious to you to get the information we need."

“Don’t talk to me like I’m some sort of chimp, what exactly do you want to do?”

“It would kill him,” Max said. “He’s too old, the body would die after dislocation.”

“What the–”

Petra put a finger to his lips. “Sir, there’s also the wedding ring. You made a remark when you saw it through your glass.”

“Oh, fiddlesticks and flapdoodles!” Ekstrand pounded his temples with the palms of his hands. “He’s protected by Lord Iron. Damnation.”

“Lord who?”

“Just be quiet,” Ekstrand snapped, now pacing. “This is disastrous. Options.”

“We…we could try hypnosis,” one of the students called out.

“Rubbish. Next!”

“We could brainwash him into thinking it’s a different day of the week,” Eagerboy said, “so that when he tries to remember, the Charm is tricked into disguising the wrong day.”

Ekstrand paused with one foot still in the air. “Interesting, but no, it assumes the Charm is only tied to time, and not context. Rubbish, you can’t go in my library now, you’re clearly not intelligent enough.”

“There’s only one option sir,” Max said. “One of *them* has to unravel the Charm.”

“And how on earth could we make that happen?”

“I think it’s possible,” Max said, as the gargoyle nodded in the doorway.

“Oh, now wait a minute, I’m dreaming, aren’t I?” Sam said, reaching the only conclusion that made sense. “How do I wake myself up?”

“You’re not dreaming, Sam,” Petra whispered.

“Lady Lavender will be very motivated to have the Master of Ceremonies found, otherwise she’ll lose a huge amount of influence in Aquae Sulis,” Max said. “We could approach the Censor, ask her to help.”

“He would have to be taken into Exilium,” Ekstrand muttered, looking at Sam out of the corner of his eye. “This is an appalling breach.”

“If we want that information, and Lavandula agrees to help, we have to bring him in or kill him afterwards.” Max was so matter-of-fact that Sam believed he would kill him then and there if it served their purpose.

“We bring him in,” Petra said, her hand tightening on his arm. “It isn’t his fault he was there. Look at him. He’s harmless.”

Sam tried his best to look as harmless as possible, disturbed by what he’d heard. He hoped their attention would shift and he’d be able to make a run for it.

“He’s clearly an idiot,” Ekstrand said.

“Hey! Stop talking about me like I’m not even here!”

“He knows about computers,” Petra said and Ekstrand narrowed his eyes at him.

“Really?”

“He speaks their language,” Petra added.

“Is this true?”

“Yeah.”

“And he’s protected, as you said,” Petra said. “We can’t kill him.”

“We can if there’s a breach involved, Lord Iron would understand,” Max said.

“Would he?” Petra raised an eyebrow. “Do we want to take the risk?”

“No,” Ekstrand concluded. “I have enough to worry about. Max, go to the Censor first thing in the morning and make it clear to her that if she doesn’t secure help from her patron, we may never find her brother. All of

you," he looked at the students, "need to write up this evening's investigation and make a list of the questions you may want to ask the subject about life in Mundanus. Dismissed."

They all bowed and left, once the gargoyle stepped aside.

"And Petra–" Mr Ekstrand stroked his chin, looking at Sam. "Ask Axon to find our subject a secure room for the night."

"I want to go home," Sam protested.

"That's out of the question, I'm afraid," Ekstrand said. "You're too valuable to send back into Mundanus. You didn't have anything important to do tonight, did you?"

Sam was too tired and drunk to think of anything quickly enough. "Not exactly." At least with Leanne being away for the night she wouldn't freak out. Then he wondered if that was actually a bad thing. "What's Mundanus anyway?"

Petra steered him towards the door. "We'll talk about that another time. You need to sleep. Tomorrow is going to be a long day."

22

Will knocked on the door of his father's study, not looking forward to the conversation he was about to have. At the call he entered to find his father studying what looked like a property contract. A frown had taken residence and looked like it was settled in for the evening.

"I thought you would have left by now," he said, setting the paper down, directing the frown at his son instead. "It is the soirée at the Peonias' tonight, isn't it?"

"I need to speak to you about something before I go." Will closed the door behind him. "I'll pass on your apologies."

"I've already sent a note. Sit down, Will, something is clearly troubling you."

Will did as he was invited. "Father…I need to borrow your purity opal."

The frown was swept away by a look of surprise. "How in the worlds did you know about that?"

Will smirked. "A girl in the French Court told me about it. She said all the heads of families have one."

Father pursed his lips. "You know what my next question is."

Will nodded. "It is for Catherine Papaver. I've heard a rumour and whilst I don't trust the source, I felt it prudent to have all the facts."

"A rumour that precipitates such a request is serious indeed, considering the contracts have already been signed."

"That's why I want to be thorough, Father."

"Who's the source of this rumour?"

“The Gallica-Rosa.”

“Not trustworthy.”

“Even unreliable sources can cause trouble.”

Father nodded and unlocked the top drawer of his desk. “I’m sure I don’t need to emphasise how discreet you must be. Don’t let another soul see you use this.”

Will nodded and took the small velvet pouch. “How do I use it?”

“Press it directly against her skin and hold it there for a few seconds. If it turns black…the rumour is true.”

Will tucked it into the inside pocket of his jacket. “Thank you, Father, I assure you I will be careful.”

The Peonias lived in a large house but not in one of the fashionable streets of Aquae Sulis. Nevertheless, their soirée was the place to be that evening; Will and Imogen’s carriage had to wait for a space to clear before they could pull up.

“We wouldn’t have had to wait if you hadn’t taken so long,” she muttered at him.

“But now we can be fashionably late,” he said, and helped her out.

He spotted the Papavers as soon as they entered one of the reception rooms. Thomas and his wife Lucy were chatting with Oliver’s parents whilst Catherine stood near the punch bowl in a world of her own. Will suppressed a surge of irritation. She should have been engaged in the conversation too, but instead she clearly thought herself above it all. When they married – if they married – that would have to change.

She was dressed very conservatively again, the dress far higher in the neckline than everyone else’s. He wondered what her mother was thinking,

instructing the maid to dress her so. Did they not care about whether she was fashionably attired now that she'd been promised to him and no longer needed to impress anyone?

Once he had shaken hands with Oliver and kissed his sister's hand, form dictated that he greet his fiancée before anyone else. Will kept it brief, bowing and kissing her hand, noting her stilted movements even in such a simple interaction. He hoped the opal would turn black and provide a decent reason to break the engagement. Then he remembered what his father had said about needing the alliance to be a success and suppressed his selfish desires.

Free of his initial obligation he headed for the card room, planning to while away some of the evening over hazard and poker, knowing that would remove the pressure to stay near Catherine. He planned to draw her away later on, once people had filled their bellies with punch and stopped watching out for who was there and who was not.

On the way he had brief conversations, maintaining a couple of running jokes with his peers and generally doing his best to make a good impression. The air in the hallway was thick with perfume and the heat of the social throng. He wondered whether the attendance was high because of the sponsorship of the Rosa. Everyone wanted to know the story behind it.

"Good evening, Mr Reticulata-Iris."

He turned at the woman's voice. It was a Rosa from the other line, the Alba who'd managed to snare the Indian princess. He bowed and kissed her hand as he tried to remember her name. Her gloves smelt of rose petals. "Miss Alba-Rosa," he said, smiling. "What a pleasure to see you."

"And you, Mr Iris. I was commenting to my brother yesterday that it was such a shame I didn't get a chance to dance with you at the opening ball."

“I’m sure I can correct that oversight at the next one.”

“I would like that very much. You dance a fine waltz. Your fiancée is very lucky.”

He smiled. “I was on my way to play cards.”

“Oh.” She looked disappointed and pulled him across the hallway to stand next to her against the wall, so they could speak without blocking the way. He was astounded by the gesture, but took care not to show it. She leant closer, the scent of roses floating up from the décolletage at which he was studiously not staring. “I understand it would be a faux pas for me to join you.”

“At cards?”

“Yes. I’ve heard it’s not the done thing for ladies to play at the same tables as the gentlemen, is that right?”

It had never occurred to him for it to be otherwise. “Absolutely,” he replied. “It would not be proper for a gentleman to win a hand and take a lady’s money.”

“Such a shame,” she sighed. “I wanted to see if you were as good at poker as you are at the waltz. One can tell only so much from the way a man dances.”

He enjoyed the thrill her flirtation sent through him. “Am I to understand that it’s different in Londinium?”

“Oh yes, at certain soirées the ladies and gentlemen play at the same tables. It makes it so much more interesting.” The way she said it made the thrill pulse into excitement. He wanted to touch her cheek, to stroke the back of her neck. He hadn’t felt this way since Sicily, and never before in Society. “You’ll have to come up for the season. I’m sure Cornelius would sponsor you if I introduced you to him.”

“I would very much like to meet your brother,” he replied. The way she spoke and held eye contact was quite intoxicating. There was none of the shyness nor the coy games played by the young ladies of Aquae Sulis about her. She was a delight for the eyes too. Again, Will hoped the opal would turn black. “Is Princess Rani here?”

“She’s having her own Grand Tour. Aquae Sulis was just one place on a very long list.”

“Not tempted to accompany her?”

“Not when there’s so much to hold me here. I hope you will dance with me at the next ball, Mr Iris.” She waved to someone behind him, leaving him with a smile to remember her by.

He deliberately settled at a table on the other side of the room to the Gallica-Rosa, forcing himself not to think of Amelia. He feared if he played a hand with Horatio, the Rosa would make a comment committing him to a path he didn’t want to take without knowing if his fiancée had any honour to defend.

When he was almost two hundred of the Queen’s pounds up and in need of a drink he left the table and returned to the main reception room. Imogen slipped her arm into his on the way, fanning herself excitedly.

“I’ve heard the most fascinating rumour, dear brother,” she said, and Will steeled himself for disaster. “Apparently, the Gallica-Rosa has told Cecilia he has a surprise that will make the princess seem dull in comparison.”

Will hid his tension behind a bored expression. “Oh? What does he have up his sleeve? A Prince from Atlantis?”

“A house in Aquae Sulis apparently, but that is to go no further. Cecilia told me in the strictest confidence.”

“Are you certain?”

“Cecilia is. And she’s trying very hard to make it up to me for not telling me he was coming for the season. He’s dripping with money, too. I think she’s hoping to catch his eye but I’m certain I can–”

“Keep away from him, Imogen,” he said, too sternly.

“He’s been sponsored in by your best friend.”

“Under duress. Father has a very low opinion of his family. It won’t go anywhere.”

“He may change his mind if he becomes a resident,” Imogen said with a smile. “Oh, and by the way, what in the world is Catherine Papaver wearing? I’d give her my seamstress’s details, but I fear she would wear her creations so poorly I’d be forced to find another.”

“I believe Cecilia is trying to catch your eye,” he said, glad to have a reason to get rid of her. He didn’t need her prattling to distract him.

He scanned the room for his fiancée, spotting her brother still talking to Oliver’s father, probably about cricket or rugby; they were both sports bores. He caught sight of Lucy’s red dress and saw her leading Catherine out of the room and onto one of the balconies. Intrigued, he got a glass of punch and went to the french doors in an effort to listen in.

“I had no idea it was going to happen,” Catherine was saying. “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s fine, really,” Lucy replied. “Tom nearly burst a blood vessel but that’s not your fault. I’m just glad you were able to come back to us.”

“I just wish he could have let me come back to your house, not right into the ball. That was so awful.”

“Well, it’s all done now and you’re the toast of the Papavers.”

“Hardly.”

“Well, I’ve heard nothing but good things. It’s been a long time since one of us has been a favourite.”

“Do you mean the Rhoeas or Californicas?”

“Either.”

There was a pause. Will sipped the punch and tried to look like he was watching people go by, rather than being tuned into the conversation outside.

“So how are things? Was it as bad as you feared?”

“Worse.”

That piqued his interest.

“Oh, Jeez. I wish they would let you stay with us. I’d like the company.”

“I wish they would too, but that’s never going to happen.”

“At least William seems like a nice young man.”

There was a longer pause.

“I don’t want to talk about him,” Catherine finally said. “I don’t want to talk about any of that.”

“You’re gonna have face up to it sometime, honey,” Lucy said, sounding far more American than he’d realised. “We all have to.”

“Not tonight,” Catherine said, and the finality of her tone made him worry she was coming back in. He had to take the opportunity to get her alone. He went out onto the balcony.

“Good evening,” he said, ignoring the dread on Catherine’s face as they both curtsied.

“Mr Iris,” Lucy smiled. “I was just singing your praises.”

“How kind of you, madam, I hope my fiancée didn’t contradict you.” He earned the blush he was hoping for on Catherine’s cheeks, then berated himself for playing such games with someone so inept. “I would very much appreciate the opportunity of a moment with my fiancée, if I may be so bold?”

Lucy raised an eyebrow, gave Catherine an encouraging smile. “I’ll be just inside.”

Catherine looked as if she were going to be sick.

The balcony overlooked a modest garden but, having spent so much time in Mundanus, he realised how pathetically fake it all appeared without proper sunlight. The Charms required to keep the plants alive were more a demonstration of wealth than anything else. He’d never appreciated before how hollow a gesture it was. Although he found it distasteful he was grateful they both had something else to look at.

Catherine moved to the stone rail, avoiding his eyes. It gave him the opportunity to palm the opal; it felt cold and the heat of his hand failed to warm it. The neckline of her dress was far higher at the back than he’d hoped it would be and barely any of her flesh was exposed; even her gloves came up to where the short sleeves of her dress ended. He wondered how he was going to test her without her knowledge. Perhaps he’d need to come up with a story to explain it away instead.

“Did you want to talk about something?” she said nervously.

“I wanted the opportunity to see how you are.”

“And whether I’m going to be civil?”

He went to stand next to her and she shuffled away a step. “Perhaps we can start again?”

She still couldn’t bring herself to look at him. “I know you’re trying really hard. And I know I’m not very good at all this.”

“I just want you to relax,” he said. “That’s why I came out here, I thought it would be easier without an audience.”

She nodded. “I don’t like everyone watching. I don’t know why they’re so interested.”

“You’re Lord Poppy’s favourite.”

“And your fiancée.”

“That too.” He moved closer and she twitched. “Why do you insist on keeping me at arm’s length? It’s almost as if you don’t want to get to know me.”

“I just–”

“I wonder if you’re scared that if you do get to know me, you may actually want to get married.”

“There’s nothing worse than an amateur psychologist,” she muttered.

“Perhaps, if you gave me a chance, you’d change your mind.”

“What if I were to suggest your ego simply can’t handle the fact that I’m not falling over myself to marry you?”

That made him pause. “Has anyone told you that you may be too clever for your own good?”

“Frequently,” she said bitterly and looked back out over the garden. “I know I’m supposed to smile and go along with all this, but I just can’t. You know, the last couple of days I’ve actually wished I could? It would be so much easier.”

“Then why not just let all this tension go? Why not let me win you over?”

She pulled a face. “Did you read some schlock romance novel whilst you were on the Grand Tour or something?”

“Catherine,” he sighed.

“Perhaps this works on silly girls who think the only thing to aspire to is marriage, but it won’t work with me.”

“I don’t think you’re a silly girl.”

“Then stop treating me like one,” she snapped.

He almost turned on his heels, but decided on a different course of action. She was trying to keep him away with words; no matter what he

said, she had a way to shoot him down. The only way he was going to get close enough to test her was to stop talking.

The plan was to gather her into his arms and kiss her passionately, pressing the opal to the back of her neck as he did so, in the hope that she'd be so caught up in the clinch that she wouldn't notice. He gently put a hand on the back of her waist, and she jumped and looked at him in surprise.

"What are you doing?" she asked as he slid his hand up her back, slowly, gently.

"I want to show you that it's not all bad," he said, slightly concerned by how she winced as he moved his hand upwards. Did she find it so unpleasant? "I want to stop treating you like a silly girl and as the woman I'm going to marry."

He slipped his hand upwards to brush the back of her neck, leaning closer as he gently angled her towards him, pressing the opal against her skin as he did so. He hoped she would accept the kiss, but instead she started to move away. He caught hold of her arm with the intention of pulling her into an embrace that all of the young women he'd kissed on the Grand Tour would have melted into.

He wasn't expecting the yelp of pain. Keeping the opal in place and her as close to him as he could with his hand on the back of her neck, he looked down at the arm she was trying to pull away from him. Without saying a word, he rolled the top of the glove down to expose her skin, revealing a deep purple bruise and then another only inches away.

Speechless, he let go of her neck, dropped the opal into his pocket without taking his eyes off the injuries and pulled down the other glove. Two horrendous bruises covered that arm too, and he wondered if the reason she'd flinched when he ran his arm up her back wasn't because she'd resented his touch but because there were other bruises.

She looked terrified, but not of him. “Your brother?” he asked, but the immediate shocked expression told him it wasn’t Thomas. “Your father?”

She looked away and he let her go. “Don’t tell anyone,” she said in a timid voice, not the one he was used to.

He was too furious to speak so he left her on the balcony hurriedly pulling her gloves back up to cover the evidence. He no longer cared about what the opal could tell him.

23

Cathy sat hunched over her dressing table, head propped up on her hands. She ached all over. Where she wasn't hurting from the beating she was stiff from the seemingly endless dancing.

She felt sick with worry. William looked furious when he saw the bruises but she had no idea what was going to come of it. If anything did, she knew it wasn't going to be good.

She got up and paced. It was all she did these days; she lay on the bed, she sat at the dressing table, she walked back and forth. This was the ultimate punishment: being locked in a room with only herself for company. No books, not even innocuous ones, and, of course, no television or internet. She was driving herself mad. All of the things she was missing out on, all of the worlds she was being denied, and the endless speculation about Josh and whether he was still staying with that coat hanger of a woman haunted her.

Surely Josh would be bored of the redhead by now. Perhaps she was doing the woman a disservice but Cathy knew Josh valued a woman's mind more than her looks; she herself was the proof! She had to get back to Josh, explain it all and apologise. If she could find a way to escape and stay hidden, she could protect him too, surely? She pushed to one side the fear that he wouldn't want her back.

She had to get out of the Nether and hide again, but her current plan was as flimsy as a mille-feuille pastry: to escape when William took her to Mundanus.

That’s as far as the plan had got and it had two major flaws. One was that she would be married by then, the second was that Lord Poppy would be able to find her, even if she did manage to wheedle another Shadow Charm out of the Shopkeeper. If she could find out how the Fae lord tracked her down, there was a chance she could stay hidden, but without that knowledge the risk was too high. Being an Iris would add another layer of complication to the pudding; rich and powerful families weren’t generally known for their sympathy when it came to any potential disgrace in Society.

She fantasised about climbing out of the window and somehow making it down to the gravel three storeys down without breaking her neck and out of the grounds without being seen. She made constant mental lists of what she’d do next; speaking to the Shopkeeper was always first, and there was a Way to the Emporium from Aquae Sulis. Getting there without being seen would be difficult. Next a mad dash to Manchester, going to one of her friends, getting the keys to the storage place…then it all unravelled, unable to keep its own integrity so far from anything realistic.

When she ran away the first time she was in Cambridge and had only a minder who liked his whisky too much and a chaperone who never wanted to leave the house as the modern life of Mundanus terrified her. She had the time and the means to research her options and carefully formulate a plan. Now she was locked in her room, high in a house in the Nether, full of staff briefed to keep a close eye on her, with hourly checks that she was still there and not up to mischief. Her father was never going to underestimate her again.

His comment about disowning her kept coming back. That’s what she really needed: to be completely abandoned by the family and kicked out of the Nether. For anyone else in Society it was a terrifying threat, being

denied a life of privilege and condemned to aging and scrabbling for survival. For her, it would be bliss.

But being disowned would earn the wrath of Lord Poppy, against not only her but the rest of her family, and as much as she hated her parents and her sister, she didn't want to cause them that amount of distress. They simply wouldn't be able to cope. Elizabeth would probably be taken in by another family as she was too beautiful and talented musically to lose to Mundanus, but her parents would be broken. Tom, with his own household now, would escape the worst, but still be devastated.

She leaned forwards until her forehead was on the polished wood, wishing she could climb out of her skin and fly away. The memory of Will's kiss made her groan with embarrassment. She just couldn't handle his attention. He was obviously trying so hard and he was right; she did keep throwing it back at him. Her stomach twisted with guilt. It wasn't his fault he'd been betrothed to such a freak. He must think so little of her, not able to even be polite, but every time he tried to be civil it made her want to scream with rage at his efforts to weave her back into being a little doll, existing only for male attention and care. Having seen what life could be, she couldn't pretend to play the game he'd urged her to.

"There has to be a way out of this," she muttered. "Don't give up. Don't–"

She heard the doorbell clang in the hallway below and the sound of the butler's shoes clipping across the tiled floor. Hurrying to press her ear against the bedroom door, she chewed her lip, wondering if it was William, and what disaster his discovery was going to bring.

It was impossible to tell who had come; she couldn't make out the voices, but she deduced it was a woman from the sound of the shoes on the tiles. Lucy?

The sound of the drawing room door closing relaxed her; it must've been a guest for her parents. She sat heavily on the bed, tired of this life already. She wanted to play Mass Effect and eat chocolate and forget about it all, just for a few hours.

Then she heard footsteps running up the stairs and towards her door. Her stomach tightened as the key turned in the lock and the maid came in.

"The mistress says you're to be dressed for a visitor," she said breathlessly, rushing to the wardrobe, which had been filled with new dresses.

"Who is it?" Cathy asked, glancing at the door, which had been left open. She felt so tempted.

"The Censor herself!" the maid said, pulling out a cream day dress matched with a jacket to cover the evidence of her father's beating.

"She wants to see me?" Cathy said, now in a full-blown panic. "Why?"

"She wants to take you out for tea," the maid said, closing the door and beginning to unhook the back of the simple day dress Cathy had been put into that morning.

"Me?" Cathy mumbled, trying to puzzle it out. Had William said something to her? Was the Censor going to ask her about the bruises?

Should she tell the truth? The Censor was her aunt, after all, but there was no love lost between them, and the Censor would be keen to avoid any embarrassment seeing as the beater's wife was her only sister.

By the time she'd been laced into the new dress and the jacket buttoned high, she'd decided to let the Censor speak first and bring it up if it was on the agenda. That was probably what form would dictate anyway.

The Censor was waiting in the hallway as she descended the stairs. Cathy's sweating hand gripped the handrail so she didn't trip over the frills of her petticoat.

“Good morning, Catherine,” her aunt said with a smile as her mother lingered nearby, watching.

“Good morning, Lady Censor,” Cathy replied, curtsying at the bottom of the stairs.

“Your mother tells me your diary is free today. I trust you have no objection to spending the day with me?”

Cathy shook her head, surprised. “No,” she said as her mother glared at her. “Not at all. On the contrary, I would be delighted.”

“Good. Off we go then. It was lovely to see you, Isabella,” she said to her sister, who smiled and withdrew as Cathy was escorted out of the house.

The Censor’s carriage was waiting. Just the fact of it being outside their house would be remarked upon as others passed. Everyone wanted to have the Censor pay a personal call, especially now the Master of Ceremonies was out of the country.

Once they were inside and skirts arranged comfortably the door was shut and the carriage moved off.

“How was the soirée at the Peonias’ last night?” the Censor enquired and Cathy wondered if it was the first test.

“Very popular,” she said, not wanting to commit herself to saying anything about William.

She readied herself for the next question, but when they rounded the corner the Censor drew the curtain over the door’s small window and her false smile faded.

“You and I are not going to Lunn’s and we will not be having lunch. I had to say that to get you out of the house.”

“Where are we going?”

“That will become clear soon enough. Now you need to listen to me carefully. The people I’m taking you to will tell you what you need to do. I

want you to do exactly as you're told."

"What people?"

"Be quiet and listen. This is very important. If you do not obey their instructions perfectly, I'll know and I will personally see you destroyed. And I'm not talking about being shunned by Society, I'm talking about ensuring you're sold into slavery and made to suffer for the rest of eternity."

Cathy blinked at her. "I'm your niece."

"An accident of birth will not protect you if this is not a success."

Cathy gritted her teeth, forcing the abuse she wanted to spout at the woman back down her throat. "I'm also Lord Poppy's favourite," she finally said. "I'm sure he wouldn't be too happy if you were to–"

"Listen to me, you stupid little girl. Your brief flirtation with success is utterly inconsequential. You may be Poppy's favourite today, but I am the Censor of Aquae Sulis and if I tell my patron you failed to cooperate, she'll have no difficulty in correcting Lord Poppy's opinion of you."

"I'd be more likely to succeed if you tell me what I'm supposed to be doing."

"As I said, the people involved will tell you everything you need to know. When this is over, if you're successful, I'll take you home and you will not tell a soul of what has transpired. If I hear even a hint of gossip about anything other than you and me having lunch today, I will make good on my previous warning."

"Is there no reward if I'm successful?"

The Censor's lips curved into a smile that made Cathy shiver. "Only the satisfaction that you've been a good citizen of Aquae Sulis."

Cathy didn't ask any more questions. It was clear no answers would be forthcoming, so she sat there, bouncing up and down uncomfortably on the seat, daydreaming about leaping from the carriage and making a dramatic

escape. She also imagined punching the Censor in the face. Neither came to pass.

They rode in silence, going steadily uphill. Cathy suspected they were heading out of Aquae Sulis. After a few minutes the carriage lurched to the left as they turned a corner sharply and the ground beneath them seemed far less even. It came to a stop and the driver knocked three times on the roof of the carriage.

“Remember what I told you,” the Censor said. She whispered a Charm of Openings as she touched the handle of the carriage door and then it was opened, revealing the blue sky of Mundanus.

Cathy was ushered out of the carriage. She almost fell down the steps when she saw the green field and felt the cool breeze. She glanced behind her, seeing the interior of the carriage appearing to float in mid-air, then it was gone as the Censor closed the Way back into the Nether. She realised she’d left her bag in there, not that it contained anything useful.

This was her chance. Cathy gathered up the absurd amount of fabric that made up the skirts of her dress, but just as she was breaking into a run her arm was grabbed from behind. She cried out at the pressure on one of the bruises as she was twisted around, not gently either.

The man wore a butler’s suit and was clean-shaven. Another man, wearing a trilby and raincoat, was leaning on crutches just behind him. He was too ugly and she had a horrible feeling he was an Arbiter.

“Are you Catherine Rhoeas-Papaver?” the butler said, not letting go.

“Maybe,” she replied, wincing at the pain. “Do you mind?”

He ignored her. She noticed a large car parked just inside the open gate to the field, and the city of Bath was visible over the downward slope of the hill.

“Blindfold her,” the Arbiter said.

“Now just wait a minute,” Cathy objected as the butler pulled the strip of black fabric from his pocket. “Is this really necessary? Will you please tell me what the hell is going on?”

The Arbiter stared at her. It was the closest she’d ever been to one and it was just as unpleasant as she’d been told it would be. “It is necessary. We’ll tie your hands if you don’t cooperate. And don’t think about bolting; this guy used to play rugby before he became a butler.”

She’d already given up on the idea. Running in a corset and fussy dress was not easy at the best of times; they’d easily catch her.

“I do apologise,” the butler whispered as he tied the blindfold.

“I’m going to check her for artefacts,” the Arbiter said, and then she felt hands patting her sleeves and fingers feeling round the inside of her jacket collar. He even prodded at her hair, making her twist her head away as best she could. “Anything you want to declare now?”

She shook her head and then was steered across the field, stumbling over the little hillocks of tufty grass, the bruise complaining all the way.

“Put her in the boot,” the Arbiter said and she heard it being opened.

“But–”

She was scooped up, dumped in and the boot slammed shut before she could present her argument. It was locked and she struggled into a more comfortable position, finding it hard to breathe when corseted and crumpled up against a jerry can. It smelt of oil and was horribly uncomfortable. She tried to rein in her panic at being locked into such a small space.

The car rumbled into life, the entire boot vibrating, then it set off and she was thrown about inside as it drove across the field. It improved slightly once they were on the road. By the way she slid into what felt like a toolbox she deduced they were going downhill and presumably back into the city.

She shoved the blindfold up onto her forehead, but it was pitch-black and disappointingly unlike the car-boot interiors she'd seen in films, which always seemed to have just enough light to see the action. She fumbled for the lock, but it was useless, she couldn't feel any way to unlock it from the inside.

Struggling to keep her nerves under control, she forced herself to think about her situation logically. The last thing she'd expected was being dumped into the hands of an Arbiter by the Censor of Aquae Sulis. What the hell was going on? She thought of her parents at home, probably delighted at their wayward daughter being invited out for the day by the most important person in Society, when in fact she was locked in the boot of an Arbiter's car in Mundanus. She started to laugh, her nerves making her predicament seem very funny all of a sudden. Her dress would probably be ruined. How was the Censor going to explain that away?

Once she stopped giggling nervously, she could think more clearly and it occurred to her that, whilst she was clearly being used as the proverbial pawn in a game much bigger than she could comprehend, it could work in her favour. She hadn't considered it before, but the Arbiters and perhaps even the Sorcerers could help her get away from Aquae Sulis. By the time the car stopped, she had a new plan, and she readied herself by putting the blindfold back on, not wanting to give them a reason to be irritated with her.

The boot was unlocked and opened, her blindfold checked. She was helped out by the butler, who apologised surreptitiously again, and she found herself standing on gravel. A driveway?

"Mr Arbiter?" she said to the blackness.

"Yes?" He was close by.

"I need to speak to you. It's not what you'll expect."

“We need to speak to you too, and I am certain you won’t be expecting what we have to say either.” She could hear him moving off on his crutches. The butler’s hand was around her arm again, but she noted it was in a different place from before.

“Listen, I need your protection.”

The sound of the hobbling stopped. “From what?”

“Not what, who. My family. You could do that, right? I mean, you stop the Great Families doing stuff all the time to protect people.”

“We protect the innocents,” he said. “Not the parasites.”

“But I’m not like them!” She heard him moving away and was steered in the same direction. “Really! I don’t want to live in Aquae Sulis any more, I need your help!”

“I wasn’t born yesterday, lady,” he replied. “I’ve heard every trick in the book. Save your breath.”

“It’s not a trick!”

“Steps ahead,” the butler said as she tripped on the first.

She heard a door opening and felt the flutter of returning panic. Where was she being taken?

There was the tell-tale sensation of entering the Nether. Her feet had been on gravel, then they’d climbed three stone steps and now their footfalls sounded as if they were walking on a wooden floor. The door was closed behind them; it sounded large and heavy. They were inside a house in Aquae Sulis, but which one?

“This way, please,” the butler said, as if she had a choice.

“What’s this about? Where are we?”

They didn’t answer and when her hand twitched towards the blindfold, the butler said, “Please don’t touch that, Miss, I would hate to have to be unpleasant.”

As much as she was trying not to admit it to herself, she was scared. She was marched down what felt like a very long corridor, this time on carpet. Occasionally she could hear the ticking of clocks and creaking floorboards upstairs. Eventually a door was opened ahead and she was steered to the right, their footsteps clicking on wooden floorboards again.

Somehow she knew there was someone else in the room. The butler pulled her further in and then pressed down on her shoulders. “Please sit down,” he said, and she felt a hard chair beneath her.

“This is the one the Censor delivered?” It was a new voice, male, deep.

“Yes, sir,” the Arbiter replied.

Sir? His boss? That meant–

“Are you a Sorcerer?” she asked, gripping the edges of the chair so they couldn’t see her shaking.

“Be quiet.” The man’s shoes clipped across the floor towards her. She had the intense feeling of being scrutinised. “There’s a curse upon her.”

“Has the Censor tricked us?” the Arbiter asked.

There was the rustle of fabric, like pockets being checked. “Hold still,” the man said and she heard the snip of a pair of scissors not an inch from her right ear.

“Hey! Did you just cut my hair?”

“Keep her here. If she tries to leave, use this.”

She had no idea what “this” was, but she didn’t want to find out. She heard the man leave, but the butler and the Arbiter were still in the room as far as she could tell.

“Listen, I was serious about what I said before,” she said.

“If you speak another word I’ll stuff a sock in your mouth,” the Arbiter said. “I’m not taking any risks with you.”

She sighed and slumped in the uncomfortable chair. It wasn't too long before the door opened again and there was a second set of footsteps.

"What the hell?" Another man's voice.

"Be quiet," said the man she suspected was the Sorcerer.

"Is it a problem?" the Arbiter asked.

"Not for our purposes," the Sorcerer replied.

"Are you OK?" said the new one. She could hear him coming closer.

"Stay back," the Sorcerer said. "She's not as harmless as she may appear to be."

"What do you think I'm going to do?" she asked. "This is a bit over the top, isn't it?"

"One should never underestimate one of your kind," the Sorcerer mumbled. "Now, we don't have a great deal of time. Did the Censor tell you why we've brought you here?"

"No. Can I please take this blindfold off?"

"No, you may not. I understand you're the favourite of Lord Poppy."

"Is that why I'm here?" There was a pause. "Yes, I am, even though I don't want to be."

"She's been trying to make us think she isn't like the rest," the Arbiter said.

"The rest of what?" the new guy said and was shushed into silence.

"Will someone please tell me why I'm here?"

"You are required to take a gentleman into Exilium to meet Lord Poppy. There is–"

"Now just wait a bloody minute," Cathy said, now angry. "You convince the Censor to drive me out of Aquae Sulis, chuck me out into a mundane field, then your mook comes and throws me into the boot of a car,

blindfolded, no explanation. I'm brought God knows where and you want me to go into Exilium to speak to Lord Poppy? No fucking way!"

There was an uncomfortable silence.

"This sounds a bit like kidnapping," the new one said. "I don't want to be involved in anything like this."

"Neither do I," Cathy said, liking him more than the others.

"Were you or were you not told to cooperate by the Censor?" the Sorcerer asked.

"She didn't tell me you wanted me to go into Exilium! Don't you know how dangerous that is?"

"Of course I do, but this is a necessity. We have a man here who's been put under a Fool's Charm and we need the memory that it's hiding to be revealed."

"Do it yourself," she said, folding her arms. "There's no way I'm going to see Poppy."

"I can't without killing him," came the reply.

"I'm not discussing this a moment longer with this bloody blindfold on," Cathy said but her hand was pushed back down as she reached up to take it off. That hand then rested on her shoulder, ready to act if she moved again. She hoped it was the butler and not the Arbiter, not that it made much difference.

"That won't be removed until you are in Exilium," the Sorcerer said.

She sucked in a breath, steadying her nerves and frustration. "Listen. If I'm going to risk more than my life for this, there has to be something in it for me. If I get this Fool's Charm lifted, I want you to–"

"There's no negotiation to be had, puppet," the Sorcerer butted in. "You have no bargaining power. If you won't cooperate, I will not hesitate to

inform the Censor and I’m certain she could make your life very difficult indeed.”

She let her head drop. He was right, she had as much leverage as a lettuce leaf. One day, she promised herself silently, I’ll be free of each and every one of you heartless bastards.

“I don’t have anything to offer Poppy.”

“You’ll think of something, I’m sure. Being his favourite sets you in good stead.”

“Who put the Charm on the man?”

“One of the Fae lords.”

“Oh dear,” she said, not holding back on the sarcasm. “I’m guessing you don’t know which one?”

“No.” Unsurprisingly, he was reluctant to admit it.

“Let’s hope it isn’t Poppy.”

“You don’t seem to have much respect for your patron.”

“I’m not like the rest of them. But you don’t believe me and you don’t care, so if I have to do this, then let’s get it over with, even though it’s the worst plan in the world. You do know that, don’t you?”

“It’s the only option we have,” the Sorcerer replied. “Get the Fool’s Charm lifted and come back here, then you’ll be returned to the Censor with a glowing report.”

“Whoopydo.”

“I’m going to open the Way. You will be guided through, then you may remove the blindfold.”

“What about getting back?”

“Your companion has a key. It can only be used when you are both in contact, and it will only bring you back to this room.”

“So don’t bludgeon him over the head and try to run away, is that what you’re saying?”

“I simply wanted to make it clear. Any questions?”

“None that you’ll answer. Oh, wait! Do I look like I’ve been thrown in a grotty car boot? Because if I do, you need to fix that. The Fae are shallow bastards and it could screw everything up.”

“I’ll get the clothes brush sir,” the butler said and she heard him walking away. The hand didn’t lift from her shoulder. She shivered.

“You certainly don’t talk like they do,” the Sorcerer said thoughtfully.

“Their ruses get more sophisticated all the time, sir,” said the Arbiter, from right behind her.

“Oh, for God’s sake,” she said. “You hardly have the moral high ground here.”

“We had to take this action because the law has been broken,” the Arbiter replied.

“Not by me,” she said, and sank into silence.

The butler returned and she was invited to stand as her clothes were brushed. The activity elicited an astonished gasp from the new guy.

“Bloody hell!” he said, which sent a flash of excitement through her. He must be a mundane; no Fae-touched or any of the Sorcerer’s people would have reacted like that. She hoped he would give more away but he was shushed before he could say anything else.

“My apologies for the state of the car boot, Miss,” the butler said. “Your dress is as it was when we first met you.”

“Remember what I told you,” she heard the Sorcerer say quietly, presumably to the man under the Fool’s Charm.

There was a sound of a curtain being drawn back, then one similar to a watch being wound, a loud knock of something against the wooden floor

and then birdsong filled the room. Cathy was pushed forwards. A hand took hers and then with the next step she felt uneven ground instead of wooden floorboards and smelt the sweet scent of flowers on the breeze. She was in Exilium again. And she was not happy about it.

24

Will’s father held out his hand. “Well?”

He dropped the opal into his palm. “She’s pure,” Will said, with a confidence he didn’t feel.

“Thank goodness for that.” Father slipped it into its velvet pouch and locked it away. “And you’re certain no one saw you?”

“I’m certain, Father,” he said, smiling; sat down at the wave of his father’s hand. I didn’t even see it myself, he thought. “And I’ve been thinking about all this… I’d like to marry Catherine sooner than we’ve discussed.”

Father leaned back in the chair, tossed his fountain pen onto the desk and laced his fingers. “What’s brought this about?”

Will chose his words carefully. “I believe Catherine would be more confident socially once we’re married. The scrutiny of being the only engaged couple of note during the season is proving to be unpleasant for her.”

“She’ll be just as much the focus of attention as a young bride.”

“But it will pass quickly enough, and I plan to take her away for a honeymoon.”

“And what of the rumour?”

“I haven’t heard anything more, but I have the feeling it’s not going to go away. Another reason I believe marrying sooner would be prudent.”

“I’m glad to see you taking your responsibility so seriously, Will.” Father tapped his index fingers together. “I confess I was anticipating far

more resistance, considering who you need to marry."

Will was relieved his mother hadn't revealed her son's true feelings. "I've had my Grand Tour and it served its purpose admirably. I'm ready to settle down." He hoped he sounded convincing.

"That being so, I feel I can speak with you frankly. I was summoned by the Patroon this morning to discuss this."

Will frowned. "Is the Patroon actively involved in all Iris marriages? Or is that unusual?"

"The conversation we had was certainly unusual," Father said. "The Patroon has been interested in this match for some time. After all, it was he who suggested it."

That surprised Will. The Iris Patroon was the head of all the Iris families, responsible for hundreds of people across dozens of family lines. Will found it hard to believe the Patroon would make all the matches himself; surely that would be too much trouble? In fact he was certain the head of each line was responsible for the marriages taking place within their family.

"I thought it was you and Mr Rhoeas-Papaver who came to the agreement," he said.

"We discussed the possibility of a union between our families some time ago. I had Nathaniel and Elizabeth in mind for a while but it was the Patroon who insisted it be you and Catherine. Will, Lord Iris himself is pressing for this marriage to go ahead. The Patroon summoned me to confirm everything was progressing as it should, and I had the distinct impression that Lord Iris is putting pressure on him to see this through."

"What did you tell him?"

"That the contracts are signed, the engagement has been announced and the wedding is being planned. I didn't mention the rumour."

Will nodded. “I can see why, Father. You wouldn’t want that to get back to Lord Iris.”

“Not when it comes from a weasel of a Rosa, who, less than an hour ago, presented the deeds to the reflection of Prior Park.”

“Really? The place that’s a mundane school?” Will had heard it spoken of at dinner parties. It was one of the great mysteries of Aquae Sulis; a fantastic property with no one resident, even though several families, including his own, would have paid a princely sum for it if anyone had known where the deeds were hidden.

“Yes, *the* Prior Park, and now he claims ownership of a property in Aquae Sulis he’s exercised his right to request citizenship of the city from the Council.”

“A Rosa in Aquae Sulis permanently?”

“That’s what he’s pressing for, and seeing as he’s the source of this rumour, and given the concern expressed by the Patroon that this marriage go ahead without any problems, I’m tasking you with ensuring he doesn’t make it public.”

“I’m starting to wonder if it should be treated as a threat, Father,” Will said. “Interesting that he gave me the chance to break the engagement first, don’t you think?”

“I think you shouldn’t underestimate this Rosa. We’ve been trying to track down the ownership of that property for over a hundred years, I’m amazed and quite frankly horrified that the deeds are in their hands. If we’re to keep the Rosas out, as we should, we need to be absolutely certain the rest of the Council will vote correctly, and the marriage to Catherine Papaver binds her father to supporting me when the time comes. Do whatever it takes, Will, but make sure that Rose keeps his foul lies to himself.”

“And the marriage date, Father?”

“I’m speaking to Charles Papaver later today, I’ll see what I can do.”

Cathy pulled off the blindfold and checked where they were before opening her mouth. She couldn’t see any trees nearby and the meadow they stood in was free of flowers. She breathed out in relief, then spun around to catch a glimpse of where she’d been taken in the Nether, but the Way had already been closed. It seemed the Sorcerer was very keen to keep his face a mystery.

“Bloody hell.”

She looked at the man holding her hand. He was a few years older with dark brown hair and he looked very tired. His jeans and jacket, coupled with the shocked expression, confirmed her suspicion he was a mundane. He noticed her looking at him and let go of her hand.

“Are you all right?” she asked.

“Well…I’m not hurt, at least. Are you OK?” he asked.

She shrugged. “As OK as can be expected. That’s not much.”

“Sounds like they put you through the mill. That clothes-brush was bloody amazing though.”

“I’m Cathy,” she said, holding out her hand at an angle to be shook, rather than kissed.

He did the right thing, much to her relief. “I’m–” He cut himself off. “They said I shouldn’t tell you.”

“Who? The incredibly kind kidnappers we were just with?”

“Good point.” He shrugged. “I’m Sam.”

“Look, Sam, we’re in deep shit here. You do appreciate that, don’t you?”

“I’ve been in it for a while now,” he said as he turned in a slow circle, taking the scenery in. “They’ve treated me a bit better than you, but they won’t let me go home. Shit, this place…have they drugged me or something?”

Cathy sat down and patted the grass next to her. “We’re not going any further until I know what the hell is going on, and you need a minute too. It looks like you’re in just as a bad a situation as I am, and, believe me, I would really like to talk to someone normal right now.”

“They said I shouldn’t talk to you at all,” Sam said, sitting down beside her. “They said you’re dangerous and can do all kinds of tricks to make me fall in love with you and do what you say.”

“Bollocks,” Cathy said and Sam grinned.

“I thought as much. They’re so strange. You seem the most normal out of all of them, apart from your clothes. What’s with all the period costume?”

“This is not what I would choose to wear, believe me.” Cathy tugged at the jacket’s high collar. “I’d kill for a pair of jeans and my old trainers again. People in the Nether are about three hundred years behind the times, and weird. They’re not part of the real world, what do you expect?”

“Err, can you go back a step? Pretend I don’t know anything.”

“Do I need to pretend?”

“No.”

She smiled. “We’re in Exilium. It’s a really pretty prison, made for the kinds of things we’re here to talk to.”

“Are they criminals?”

“This isn’t a good place to debate that,” Cathy whispered. “And like all this kind of stuff, it depends who you speak to.”

He nodded. “This is the weirdest prison I ever saw. But then, it’s been the weirdest couple of days of my life. I know something’s wrong with me, but the way they’re acting…it’s creeping me out. They only let me send a note to my wife when I pointed out she’d call the police, and I’m not even sure if Axon really posted it.”

“Axon?”

“The butler.”

“Oh. He seemed the most decent out of all of them.”

“He’s all right. Petra’s the nicest, she’s the librarian, but they said she had to stay away from you.”

“Sounds like they made me out to be something really awful. If I was like the rest of the Great Families, they’d have every right to be nervous of me, but I’m not like them, I swear it.”

He was looking right into her eyes. “I believe you,” Sam said. He rubbed his eyes and shook his head. “So this is Exilium…what’s the Nether? I keep hearing that word.”

“It comes from ‘neither here nor there’,” she said. It felt odd explaining it. “It’s between the real, normal world – what they call Mundanus – and here. It’s where the Great Families live. And Sorcerers too. That was his house, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah. It’s a really weird place. The sky is all fucked up too.”

She chuckled. “That’s because there is no sky. I think. I don’t really understand the physics of it all. Suffice to say that in the Nether, you’re not in the real world, you’re not here, you’re in between. And you don’t age there either.”

“That’s why I haven’t needed to shave!” he exclaimed. He shrugged at her raised eyebrow. “I get hung up on the little questions. Mr Ekstrand

really is a Sorcerer, then? Opening the door to this place was the first time I saw him do anything like magic. Oh, crap, what am I talking about?"

"It's all going to be OK," Cathy lied. "How did you end up with a Fool's Charm?"

He rolled his eyes. "Wrong place, wrong time was how Petra put it. I got pissed, I ended up behind the Holburne Museum gardens, apparently. Max found my wallet there. He was the guy with the broken leg."

"My God, my uncle lives there, in the Nether version of that house. Did they say why it's important to lift the Charm?"

"They said some bloke has gone missing and I might be a witness."

"Now it makes sense," Cathy muttered. "No wonder the Censor was laying it on thick; something's happened to my uncle and the Sorcerer must have approached her for help. She didn't want to risk herself, so she packs me off to them. What a cow." Her aunt couldn't even bring herself to tell the truth to her own sister and niece. If she'd told her what it was all about in the carriage she would have helped without hesitation. But then her aunt probably only saw her as an untrustworthy and rebellious carbuncle of a girl who needed to be half scared to death to keep in line. Cathy looked at Sam, not wanting to think about her family. "I'm surprised the Sorcerer couldn't lift it."

"It's too strong or something. And I'm protected by Lord Iron, whatever that means."

Cathy shrugged. "Never heard of him."

"He's in the wedding ring business, I reckon." Sam held up his bare left hand. "They said I had to take it off before I came here. I just hope that when this is all cleared up they'll let me go home – my wife must think I've done a runner."

Cathy wasn't certain the Sorcerer would let him go without any trouble. There were rules about what mundanes should and shouldn't know, and Sam was on the wrong side of them. But she didn't know much about how the Sorcerers dealt with that kind of problem, and she didn't want to worry him more than he already was. "Well, now we know what this is about, we'd better get moving," she said. "Give me a hand up? These corsets are a pain."

He helped her up and she lifted the hem of her dress so she could walk over the uneven ground without tripping.

"So you said this place is dangerous." Sam looked around. "It doesn't seem too bad to me."

"Trust me, this is the most dangerous place you'll ever visit. One tiny mistake and you can be turned into a slug, or enslaved or worse."

"An enslaved slug?"

"Very funny."

"And who is this Poppy guy we need to see?"

"He's the patron of my family."

"And what does that mean?"

"We're all scared of him and have to do what he says."

"Like a mafia Don?"

"I've noticed the similarity, but here's not the place to talk about that. Just don't touch anything, do anything or even say anything unless I tell you, OK? I'm going to do everything I can to make sure we both get out of this in the same state as we came in. What does that key look like, by the way?"

He pulled a door knob out of his jacket pocket. A large emerald was set into it and runes covered every square centimetre of its surface.

“Put it back,” she whispered, desperate to look at it more closely, but afraid their arrival had already been noticed. She’d never seen a Sorcerer’s artefact before. It certainly looked very different from the ones sold at the Emporium.

“Think it will work?”

“I’m sure they want you back,” she said.

“You really don’t seem like they said you would be.”

“It’s because I’m not. But we’ll talk about that later, OK? If we don’t focus on getting this done, the mess I’m in will be academic.”

The club was quiet enough to be relaxing yet full enough to be entertaining. Will sauntered to the bar and ordered a gin and tonic, glancing at the high-backed leather chairs filled with gentlemen lounging with cigars and discussing nothing of interest.

Glass in hand he strolled past the billiards room and ended up in the card room. Its wood panelling gave the large space a sense of age and cosiness. Oliver was sweating over a hand in the corner. No matter how hard he tried he was hopeless at poker. Will waited for the hand to finish before going over to him.

“How about a game of whist, old chap?” he suggested, knowing they’d be hard to beat after the amount of practice they’d put in over the Grand Tour.

“Rather,” Oliver said and withdrew from the game.

They sat opposite each other at a new table, sending out a silent signal for another pair of players to join them. Will was in no hurry so he didn’t wave anyone over, content to while away the time with his best friend until

they were joined by others. He hadn’t counted on Horatio Gallica-Rosa walking in with one of the Wisteria twins.

“Ah, a game of whist, just what I was in the mood for!” Horatio said and pulled back one of the free chairs. “You don’t mind if we join you, do you, Oliver?”

“Of course not,” Oliver said, unconvincingly.

The Rosa sat down, and opposite him the Wisteria, who looked quite pleased with himself. “Good afternoon,” he said and both Will and Oliver nodded politely.

The first hand was dealt and the Wisteria gushed about the soirée the night before. It was embarrassing, but Horatio was amused by him and Oliver accepted the praise on behalf of his family graciously.

“Your fiancée was a picture,” Horatio said as the next round was dealt.

“Oh, were you there?” Will asked. “I do apologise, I missed you.”

“Too busy gazing into someone’s eyes, I wager,” Horatio said. “I saw you both in the corridor.”

Will didn’t look at him, instead choosing to study his hand and keep calm. So what if he saw his brief flirtation with the Alba-Rosa girl? It was hardly scandalous. “It was a fine evening. Your parents must be delighted, Oliver.” He smiled at his friend.

“Rather,” said Oliver with a grin, the red apple cheeks returning.

“This is an excellent club,” Horatio remarked. “I was worried I’d miss Black’s in Londinium, but not any more.”

“You speak as though you’re not planning to return,” the Wisteria boy said, with just enough inelegance to make Will wonder if he was trying too hard to set Horatio up with an opportunity to gloat.

“Oh, haven’t you heard?” he smirked in that sleazy way of his. “The Council is considering my application for citizenship, now that the deed for

my house has been presented."

"A house in Aquae Sulis?" Oliver gasped, with all the social grace of a baying donkey. "I thought that was just a rumour."

"Well, so many rumours turn out to have a basis in truth. Wouldn't you agree, Mr Iris?"

"I find it astounding that a deed to an Aquae Sulis property just turns up," Will said, ignoring the comment. "What good fortune your family is enjoying."

"Indeed. Seems it was misplaced and forgotten about for decades. Our family has so many properties in Londinium and elsewhere it didn't occur to us to look for it."

He won the trick and Will knew it was because Oliver had made a stupid mistake. The news had upset him, evidently.

"We're planning a party," Horatio said, dealing the next round. "I'm sure that so many people in the city would be delighted to see inside after all these years. You're all invited, of course."

"Why thank you!" the Wisteria boy chirruped like an excited songbird. Will could imagine him hurrying home that evening to tell his family he played cards with no less than an Iris and the up-and-coming Rosa. What impressive social climbing, his mother would think, and kiss his cheek with pride.

"I'm sure it will be a great success," Will said as Oliver nodded. "There's nothing better than curiosity to draw a fashionable crowd."

"Speaking of which," Horatio said with an oily smile, "I was wondering which finishing school your fiancée attended."

"One in Switzerland."

"Which one exactly?"

"I don't recall."

“Really?”

“Sorry to disappoint you,” Will said, moderating his tone carefully. “I’m sure Mrs Rhoeas-Papaver will be able to give you the details if you need them so desperately. Feeling the need to improve upon your manners?”

Oliver snorted as the Wisteria sucked in a breath.

“Simply curious,” Horatio replied, lowering the hand of cards so he could focus more on Will. “She has such an unusual manner.”

“And what–”

Will was cut off by the arrival of a young man who was only vaguely familiar. He placed himself between Will and Horatio, bending over to speak in Will’s ear.

“Excuse me, Mr Reticulata-Iris? I’m dreadfully sorry to interrupt, I was wondering if I could have a word?”

Will, grateful for an excuse to leave the table and let the conversation simmer back down, made his apologies and accompanied the man to the bar.

“I’m Cornelius Alba-Rosa, I believe you spoke to my sister at the soirée last night.”

“Oh, yes, a pleasure to meet you at last,” Will said, shaking his hand as they sat down.

“Forgive my rudeness in the card room but, between you and me, I had the feeling that Gallica toad was about to cause a scene.”

His voice was soft, his manner gentle. Will could see the resemblance to Amelia, and something about Cornelius’s smile made him warm to him, despite the fact that he was a Rosa.

“Speaking from experience?”

“You could say that.” Cornelius pulled out a slim wooden cigarette case but seemed to have second thoughts. “I’m about to meet Amelia for

afternoon tea at Lunn’s. Would you care to join us?”

The idea of seeing Amelia again was so much more appealing than staying at the club. “I’d like that very much.”

“So how do we find this guy?” Sam asked. They’d only been walking for a few minutes.

“Exilium doesn’t work like the normal world, or even like the Nether.” Cathy wished she could take the jacket off but didn’t want to reveal the bruising. “You find places by wanting to arrive.”

“Eh?”

“Don’t worry about it,” she replied. “I think I’ve got it covered.”

It was hard work willing herself to find Lord Poppy when in reality he was the last person she wanted to see. She was thankful she’d been given a refresher lesson on surviving Exilium by her mother, just in case she was summoned back to their patron. It was the longest interaction she’d had with her since returning home. The lesson wasn’t exactly delivered with love. She wondered if her mother was even capable of that.

“It’s so nice here,” Sam sighed. “Shame we have to do something and not just relax.”

“Careful,” Cathy said. “Don’t let your mind drift. This place can suck you in. I’ve heard that people have been lost here forever just because they stopped thinking about what they came in for. And that’s the people who actively chose to come here. Keep your mind on what we need and getting back home again.”

He nodded, but she wasn’t convinced he was really taking it in. She must sound like a lunatic. He probably hadn’t believed a word she’d said. She felt sorry for him; as much as she hated all this, at least it made sense to

her. He was just some poor bloke sucked into the crazy with no point of reference at all.

“We’ll get through this,” she said, slipping her hand into the crook of his elbow. “In a weird way I’m glad she sent me and didn’t do it herself. She would have been horrible to you.”

“That Censor you mentioned?”

“Yeah.”

“So she stops people from saying bad stuff about you guys?”

Cathy shook her head smiling. “Not censor like those film classification guys, Censor as in the ancient Roman office. They basically say who is allowed into Aquae Sulis Society and what status they have once they get there.”

“Sounds powerful. What’s Aquae Sulis?”

“Not what, where. It’s parts of Bath reflected in the Nether; the Great Families use the Roman name to distinguish between them. And yes, the Censor is very powerful. The only person as powerful as her is the Master of Ceremonies and he’s the one who is missing. The Censor said he was abroad; she must have been covering up. He’s my uncle, you know. And the Censor is my aunt.”

“You must be worried.”

She shook her head. “We’re not close. They think I’m rubbish.”

“Did you hear that?” His head snapped round.

“What?”

“Someone laughing, I think. They sound familiar.”

“Shit, that’s never good,” Cathy muttered and felt him pull away in the direction he was looking. “Sam, let’s keep going.”

“But I can hear someone. I don’t remember seeing those trees before.”

She followed his pointed finger and could see a small copse of trees. “That’s because they weren’t there. We must have drifted.”

“Poppy might be there. Let’s look anyway, I’m sure I heard someone laughing,” he said, breaking into a jog.

“Wait!” she called, but he was off. “Bloody hell,” she groaned, trying to catch up but it was hard in the ridiculous outfit.

By the time she reached him he was already past the outer line of trees. She looked for flowers and faeries but saw none. She caught hold of his hand before he went in any further.

“Come on,” she said, trying to pull him away, but he resisted.

“Look.”

He pointed further into the copse and she glimpsed something glittering, but no poppy petals. Would there be a path if he wasn’t expecting her?

Her moment of indecision was too long and he set off towards it. “Sam…”

“I just want to look and then we’ll move on. We’ll be careful.”

She wondered how many slaves had said that in their last moments of freedom. Staying alert, she kept hold of his hand and watched out for any signs of whose domain it was.

“I think there are people up ahead,” he said, at least having the sense to drop his voice to a whisper.

“Remember, let me do the talking,” she whispered back, trying to get a better look. If there were people ahead, they seemed very still.

The trees thinned and opened out onto a clearing, just like when she’d found Lord Poppy before, but there were no flowers and no Fae lords to be seen. Instead, there were flesh-coloured statues, four women and one man with various shades of blonde hair, wearing sparkling and rather revealing

clothes. They were in a variety of poses, like they had been frozen mid-dance.

Beside them was a long table made of a great tree that had been toppled and sliced in half. The other half looked like it had been made into chairs, each one carved with the distinct shape of each of the Great Families' flowers. She saw one with a carved stylised poppy just like the one on her family's coat of arms. She spotted an iris too.

The table was covered in fruit and looked like a dream feast. Perhaps it was a neutral meeting place for the Fae lords and ladies. If that was the case, they needed to leave.

"Let's go," she said, pulling at his hand again.

"Hang on," he said, staring at one of the women. "She's familiar. I think I've seen her on the telly." He pulled her closer. Cathy kept looking around and behind them nervously but he just wouldn't get the hint.

"There could be–"

"Holy crap!" he yelled and jumped back. "Feel!"

He thrust her hand in front of the statue's face, Cathy felt a gentle breath on her skin. Now she was really looking, she could see it was a real person who had been frozen. She wasn't sure which was more disturbing, the fact that someone was trapped in their own body, or that it was so unsurprising.

She stooped to part the grass by the woman's feet, finding the band around the woman's left ankle, glittering like it was made of crushed diamonds. She shook her head sadly, feeling sorry for the trapped dancers, but there was nothing she could do for them.

It wasn't until he sucked in a breath that she realised Sam had gone towards the table. She was terrified he'd eaten something, but then she saw what had shocked him, and it was far worse.

It was a faerie belonging to Lady Rose, one of the most powerful figures in the Fae Court. And it recognised Sam.

25

Amelia was dressed in a jade-green gown and looked divine. Will enjoyed kissing her hand, and held it a moment longer than he should as her scent filled him. Something about the way she looked at him as he pressed his lips to the back of her glove made him bold enough to do so.

“What a lovely surprise,” she gasped in a most becoming way, and arranged her skirts as they waited for the waiter.

“Your brother rescued me from the Gallica,” Will said. Seeing how fond Amelia was of her brother, Will suspected winning Cornelius’s friendship would set him in good stead with her.

“He hasn’t been causing problems again, has he?” she asked, and Cornelius nodded as he ordered afternoon tea for the three of them.

“Again?” Will asked.

“He’s been horrid to some of the people in Londinium,” Amelia began but Cornelius held up a hand.

“Darling, do you think it’s right to spread gossip in Aquae Sulis about a Londinium man?”

“I haven’t said a word about him to anyone else. If Mr Iris has already seen some of his true colours, then it’s hardly gossip.” She smiled at him as she tugged at the fingers of her gloves and removed them. “I consider it timely information.”

“Call me Will, please,” he said to both of them. “And I would be grateful to learn more about him. It seems he’s keen to make me lose my temper.”

“He does that,” Cornelius sighed. “He likes to work out what upsets a chap so he can offend them to the point of being called out.”

“He’s desperate to show off his swordsmanship,” Amelia added, sliding forwards in her seat to pour the tea for the three of them. A tall multi-tiered cake stand arrived as she did so and the waiter put their choices onto little plates. “It really is very tiresome. I think he’s excited to find new people to duel. It’s only natural he should target you.”

“Really?” Will took a cup from her. “I would have thought he’d be eager to bait Nathaniel.”

“Oh, but you’re more handsome and more popular than your brother.”

“Amelia,” Cornelius said in a gently cautionary tone. “Please forgive my sister, Will, she’s been known to speak her mind on a few too many occasions.”

“I just speak the truth,” Amelia said, winking at Will as Cornelius stirred his tea. Will nearly choked on his Bath bun.

“There’s also the possibility he’s hoping your brother would stand in for you,” Cornelius said, leaning back and breaking the moment of eye contact. “Either way, it’s reprehensible behaviour, and when I saw the way he was looking at you in the card room, I simply had to intervene.”

“For which I’m even more grateful now,” Will said. “To think I could have played straight into his trap. What an odious wretch.”

“It’s sad really,” Amelia said. “Such a shame he resorts to such measures to bolster his fragile sense of worth.”

“It’s more than sad,” Cornelius said. “It’s positively dangerous. The Londinium Court breathed a sigh of relief when he announced he was going to Aquae Sulis for the season. I fear your city is in danger of taking on Londinium’s burden permanently.”

“You’re referring to this fabled property?” Will frowned at his nod. “Yes, that was rather bad news. I’d be very surprised if the Council didn’t award him citizenship; having a property already is ninety per cent of the battle.”

A look was exchanged between the siblings. They held each other’s gaze for a moment and then Cornelius nodded at his sister. He leaned closer to Will as Amelia pulled her chair in a little more.

“Amelia and I have been discussing this very matter. Can we count on your discretion, Will?”

“Indeed,” he replied, setting his cake plate on the table.

“We don’t want that Gallica toad to get into Aquae Sulis either,” Amelia said. Will found her conspiratorial tone quite endearing. “Quite apart from the fact that he’s an ‘odious wretch’, as you said, who would spoil such a haven of civility, it would also upset our parents greatly.”

“I’m sure you appreciate how it would impact upon our status as an opposing Rosa family,” Cornelius added, “to have one of our enemies achieve such a social triumph in the very same season we finally managed to secure entry.”

“You really must tell me how you persuaded Princess Rani to travel back with you,” Will said, remembering how irritated he’d been at the first ball. “Another time, of course. And yes, I do appreciate how upsetting that would be. I’ve heard there’s bad blood between your lines.”

“That was Horatio’s doing,” Amelia whispered. “Our families have been at peace since the Tudor alliance, which was so successful for both of us. But that prideful sack of hot air couldn’t bear the fact that Cornelius was picked by–”

“Amelia,” Cornelius interrupted her gently. “I’m sure Will doesn’t need to be bored by the machinations of our families.”

She blushed, making the green of her eyes all the more striking. Will cursed himself for being such a fool as to try and save Catherine from her father when he could easily have destroyed the engagement and pressed for a union with the Alba-Rosas.

“Suffice it to say,” Cornelius said, “we’re motivated to help anyone who wishes to keep the Gallica line out of Aquae Sulis.”

“But isn’t it rather late?” Will watched Amelia pour another round of tea. Her hands were slender and delicate. “He said he has the deeds to the property. Nothing can be done about that.”

“Not necessarily,” Cornelius said. “It’s our belief that if we could secure sufficient support in Aquae Sulis, we could persuade our Patroon to force the Gallicas to transfer the deeds into our ownership.”

“It would make much more sense to have a popular Rosa line in the city than one that has already put important people’s noses out of joint,” Amelia said, taking the opportunity to look into Will’s eyes for a few beats as Cornelius attended to his new cup of tea.

“That makes a great deal of sense,” he replied. “Would your parents leave Londinium?”

“I doubt it,” Cornelius said. “They’re too involved at Court. I should imagine it would be Amelia and I, don’t you think so, dear?”

She nodded. “And I would be delighted. It’s a beautiful city. To live here would be divine. You and Cornelius could play cards and I could become friends with your sister.”

Will imagined Amelia being a larger part of his life and found he liked it. “I think it’s an admirable proposition. As you say, it makes so much more sense for your Patroon to have a family capable of establishing friendships here and for us to keep the likes of Horatio out.” He set his teacup down and offered his hand to Cornelius. “I’ll speak to my father. He’s on the

Council, perhaps they could drag their heels whilst you establish yourselves more. I'll speak to my mother and see about having you both invited to a dinner party so you can rub shoulders with some of the other councillors."

"That would be greatly appreciated," Cornelius said with a firm handshake and warm smile.

"I would love to meet your parents," Amelia said, offering her hand. "You're very kind, Will."

He kissed her hand, his lips touching her skin for the first time. Soft and warm, she smelt of rose water and he wanted to turn her hand over and kiss her wrist before moving up her arm. When he flicked his eyes up at her, he had the distinct impression she wanted the same.

"I'll see you soon," he promised.

Cathy stayed in her crouch. The faerie was so fixated on Sam it hadn't noticed her, and she wanted to keep it that way.

"Whoa!" Sam was pointing at it, agog.

"You!" The tiny creature pointed back at Sam with a mixture of shock and confusion. "What are you doing here?"

"Bloody hell! You can talk! You're like a boy Tinkerbell. That's so cool!"

As Sam was horrendously mundane at the faerie, Cathy edged around the frozen slaves and took the opportunity to scurry behind one of the carved chairs, putting her behind the faerie as it floated towards him.

"You don't recognise me…do you know where you are?"

"Exilium," Sam replied. "I didn't know little dudes like you would be here though. You're so tiny! And you talk! That's wild."

Cathy grabbed the rim of one of the wooden platters on the table.

“And how did you get here, mortal?”

Before he could reply, Cathy leaped up and swung the platter at the faerie, scattering the berries piled on top of it. It connected with a satisfying thwack and the creature tumbled out of the air. She ran after it, slamming the platter upside down over it, giving it enough room so it wouldn’t be squashed, but hoping to keep it pinned whilst it was dazed.

“Get me one of those jugs!” she yelled at Sam who was staring with a gawping mouth.

He got one from the table and handed it to her. It was heavy enough, filled with what looked like wine. She put it on top of the platter.

“Come on!” She grabbed his hand and pulled him from the clearing.

“How could you do that?” he said, still shocked enough to be pulled away. “It was a–”

“They are evil little bastards,” she said, steering them through the trees as fast as she could. “Honestly, all the stuff you ever heard about faeries, it’s not true. Imagine an evil psychopathic version of Tinkerbell who hates all humans and you’ll get closer. Now run, for God’s sake! If it finds us in here we’ll end up like those dancers!”

“What about them? We can’t leave them!”

“There’s nothing we can do.”

When he started to run properly they reached the edge of the trees much faster, and burst out into the sunshine-drenched meadow. Cathy didn’t stop until the trees were receding into the distance, then realised she couldn’t run much further without passing out.

“Bloody corset,” she muttered, desperate to take a deep breath.

“This place is weird,” Sam said, slowing to a stop and half holding her up as she heaved for air. “You never said there would be Tinkerbells.”

“I hoped we wouldn’t run into any. It recognised you.”

Sam shrugged. “I’ve never seen anything like it before.”

“If we see any others, remember what I said. They are spiteful little gits, and all they want to do is make our lives hell.”

“Hello!”

They both jumped at the tiny voice. Another faerie, this one more feminine and dressed in poppy petals, zipped around in front of them.

“Oh, bugger,” Cathy groaned.

“I’m so glad I found you!”

“Go away.”

It looked genuinely hurt. “But I’m here to help you.”

“Yeah, right.”

“I already have, I tricked the Rose faerie into thinking you went another way. He’s very angry.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Why?”

“Duh! I know what you’re like.”

“How can you? We’ve never met before. And I was so excited.” It sniffed.

“Don’t be mean,” Sam said, holding out a hand for the faerie to land on.

“Didn’t you hear a word I just said?” snapped Cathy, scowling.

The faerie waved at Sam, who grinned and waved back with one finger, then stuffed his hand in his pocket, embarrassed. “You’re looking for Lord Poppy, aren’t you? I can help you!”

Cathy peered at the creature, confused. How could it behave so differently? It looked the same, but it was probably a trick. “Prove it,” she said, folding her arms.

The faerie leapt off Sam’s hand and flew towards a gentle hill. “Follow me!”

Sam started off and Cathy looked skywards, wondering what appalling things she must have done in a previous life to deserve this. She decided to go as far as the crest of the hill, and then its trickery would be exposed.

They climbed. Cathy's stomach rumbled and her ribs ached. Sam seemed happy just to watch their pseudo-guide flutter about ahead of them.

Just like the time she was brought in before, a copse of trees could be seen from the crest of the hill. She could even see a red poppy bobbing at the edge of the trees.

"See!" The faerie zinged back to her, looking hopeful.

"Mmm," Cathy said, not feeling any different towards the thing. "That's the place, Sam. Just stay quiet, OK? And he's a little different, so try not to react like a…tourist."

"OK." He offered his arm but she declined, not wanting Lord Poppy to see them arrive that way.

"Just stay close."

"When this is done," Sam said as they trudged down the hill, "we should go out for a beer."

"You don't know how much I would like that," Cathy said, giving him a sad smile. "But I doubt it will happen."

They reached the trees and she breathed as slowly and steadily as she could to get her nerves under control. Lord Poppy was in sight soon enough, looking just as he had before, as if he hadn't moved in the days since she spoke with him.

His smile was predatory, his gaze sweeping over her and then staring at Sam with open curiosity.

"Ah, my favourite returns, what a delight! A surprise visit *and* a gift, how thoughtful!"

She realised he meant Sam. “Oh, um, he’s not a gift–” Lord Poppy’s smile transmuted into something thunderous “–in the sense that you may think, Lord Poppy. Rather, something trapped in his mind is a gift far more interesting than he is. He’s just a boring mundane, no gifts or talents whatsoever, I wouldn’t dream of bringing you anyone less than spectacular.”

Her quick words smoothed the scowl into an intrigued smile. “How interesting. But first, my soft little petal, come here so that I may admire you.”

She took a few steps closer, glancing nervously at the faerie as it flitted over to sit on his shoulder, smiling happily.

“You look so much better than the last time I saw you. What a delightful sparkle there is in your eye.”

“It’s difficult to hide my delight at seeing you again, my Lord,” she said, amazed at how much easier it was to spout rubbish after being in the Nether for a few days.

“And I see you’ve met this one.” His black eyes glanced at the faerie.

“She doesn’t like me,” the faerie said quietly.

Lord Poppy frowned. “What’s this? Why don’t you like her?”

Cathy shuffled. “She was less than helpful when I had the three wishes to think of, my Lord.”

“Impossible! That wasn’t her. How could you think such a thing? She looks completely different!”

Cathy peered at the faerie. It was identical to the one who’d ruined Josh’s life. But Lord Poppy was staring at her, waiting for a reaction. She raised her eyebrows. “I must be mistaken. Please accept my apologies.”

The little thing clapped its hands, dived off Poppy’s shoulder and pressed a kiss on the end of her nose.

“You mistook her for the one I’ve locked in a box,” Lord Poppy said casually. “That was the one who upset you. Sour little creature that it was, this one is much nicer, wouldn’t you agree?”

Cathy just nodded, not really caring, just wanting to navigate the fastest path through the conversational labyrinth.

“Now, what little nugget is trapped in this mundane’s mind? Why is it interesting?”

Cathy had been considering what to say since they set off down the hill, and had decided upon a risky strategy. “I believe it’s something that could get Lady Rose into a little bit of trouble.”

“Only a little bit?” Lord Poppy said, disappointed.

“I’ve been told I have a gift for understatement, my Lord. Of course, it also isn’t my place to decide how much trouble she could be in; it requires your knowledge and brilliance to make such a judgement.”

Lord Poppy beckoned Sam over with a long finger, tilting his head as he looked at him. When he was close enough, Lord Poppy curled his hand around the back of Sam’s neck and drew his face towards him. Cathy shivered as the Fae lord licked Sam’s forehead, remembering when he’d done the same to her wrist at the Emporium.

“Oi!” Sam rubbed his face as he was released. “Did you just lick my forehead?”

Cathy pulled him back to stand next to her. Lord Poppy was looking up at the sky, smacking his lips together like a sommelier trying to identify a vintage.

“A Fool’s Charm, definitely a Rose, very strong too. How interesting. What have they locked inside you, little mundane?”

“We’d like to find out,” Cathy said. “Would you be so kind as to lift the Charm for us, my Lord?”

“Would I?” he mused, still staring at Sam. “Would I…. yes, I believe I would be so kind.”

Cathy breathed out in relief.

“If you give me another memory in return,” Lord Poppy added.

“Eh?” Sam looked at her. “Does he mean–”

“Only one?” Cathy asked, frantically trying to think of a way to limit it.

“Only one,” Poppy confirmed. “Of my choice. He won’t miss it, I’m certain.”

“Agreed,” Cathy said as Sam took another breath. It was probably the best deal they could get, and the longer they spoke to the Fae lord, the higher the probability of screwing something up.

“Marvellous.” Poppy’s smile was terrifying. “Come here,” he said to Sam. “This will hurt and may drive you mad.”

“What? Then I don’t want to do it.”

“But it’s been agreed,” Poppy said calmly, unconcerned by the way Sam looked like he was about to bolt. He lifted his cane off the ground and pointed it at him. The poppies near Sam’s feet twisted around his ankles.

“Hey!” Sam yelled as Cathy covered her mouth, trapping the objection she’d almost blurted out.

“It’s for your own safety,” Poppy said gently and thrust his cane into the ground to free both hands.

“Cathy!” Sam said desperately, trying to twist around, but the poppies grew higher, now creeping past his knees and holding him tighter.

“Stay calm,” she said, trying her best to look confident, hoping he’d get through it.

As Lord Poppy stooped to pluck a seed pod from amongst the blooms, Sam tried to peel off some of those wrapped around his legs, only to have

his hands snared also. The Fae tipped a single seed onto his palm and discarded the pod.

“Open your mouth,” he said, amused by Sam’s panicked struggling.

“You’ve got to be joking,” Sam said.

“Do it, Sam,” Cathy said. “Please, don’t make it any worse.”

“No bloody way!”

Lord Poppy yawned and flicked a finger at the flowers. Two shoots raced upwards, prising Sam’s mouth open as he tried to protest. Cathy tasted blood on her tongue as she bit her lip, gripping the fabric of her skirts tightly, feeling terrible for Sam.

The Fae lord dropped the seed in Sam’s mouth; the poppy stems then shut his mouth and held it closed by pressing against his jaw. The poor man sucked frantic lungfuls of air through his nostrils, blinking rapidly, and then squeezed his eyes shut as a terrible screeching sound rose up from his throat.

Cathy reached for him but Lord Poppy caught her hand before she could lay it on Sam’s shoulder, shaking his head, a broad smile on his face.

A sheen burst out on Sam’s forehead, then Cathy realised it wasn’t sweat, but instead something that sparkled in the dappled sunlight. It coalesced into the shape of chain links, growing in intensity as Sam fought his bonds. Then it evaporated, rising as sparkling steam, and Sam collapsed onto his knees, snapping some of the flower stalks twisted around his legs.

The stems holding his mouth shut receded as Poppy returned to him, lifting his chin with a finger. “Still in there, are we?”

“I remember,” Sam gasped. “I remember all of it.”

“Good,” Poppy grasped his hair. “Then I will judge its worth and take my payment.”

Without warning, he tipped Sam's head to the side and bent over him, his long, horribly pointed tongue darting into Sam's ear like a hummingbird's beak into a flower. "Hmmm," he said, his tongue withdrawing after a couple of seconds.

"Oh, God, did he just lick the inside of my ear?" Sam rubbed his head frantically, the flowers that had imprisoned him now falling away. He struggled back onto his feet, backing away from the Fae. "That's disgusting!"

"Shush," Cathy said, taking hold of his hands and trying to calm him. "Later, we talk later."

He nodded, shivering. She pushed him behind her.

"Lady Rose has been busy," Lord Poppy said, extracting his cane from its resting place.

"Which memory did you take?" Sam asked and Cathy shushed him again.

"One that is gold and green and tastes of nothing at all. You won't miss it," Poppy said.

"Thank you, my Lord," Cathy said, curtsying deeply. She grabbed Sam's hand and took a step to leave.

"Oh!" Lord Poppy said, in such a tone that Cathy started to shake again. "I almost forgot. We haven't discussed my compensation."

"Compensation, my Lord?" Cathy tried not to squeak.

"Yes, for taking the mundane away with you and not leaving him here for me to use as I see fit."

"But–" Sam shut up when she squeezed his hand as tight as she could.

"I understand," Cathy said, hating him, hating all of them, Fae and Great Families alike. There was no point in arguing; this was Lord Poppy's domain.

“I will be satisfied if you promise to give me a painting that is the best of your generation.”

She goggled at him. “I haven’t even had a chance to buy the canvases yet!”

“Oh, sweetest child, you’re my favourite.” Lord Poppy swept towards her and stroked her cheek. “That’s why I haven’t given you a deadline. I can wait.”

“Thank you, my Lord,” she forced herself to say.

“Run along now,” Poppy said. “I have a party to attend, one I believe may prove more entertaining than I previously thought. I’ll be sure to make it last as long as possible. Do come again, Catherine Rhoeas-Papaver, your visits never fail to be surprising. And don’t worry about anyone else interfering – I’ll send this one,” he waved the faerie over, “with you to see you on your way safely.”

Cathy curtsied again, trying not to flinch as the faerie came and kissed her on the cheek. “Thank you, my Lord.”

“And Catherine,” he said. “Don’t trust the Rosas.”

26

Sam pulled the doorknob out of his pocket once Lord Poppy's domain was out of sight. Cathy had sent the faerie away and he'd never wanted a beer so much in his life. Now he knew what happened that night he could tell Ekstrand, go home and do his best to try to forget it all over again.

"Before we go through, Sam, can I talk to you about something?"

"Shoot."

"I need your help. I ran away from my family and made a life in your world but the one that stuck his tongue in your ear found me and sent me back to them."

"Why did you run away?"

"A zillion reasons," she sighed. "If I tell you, will you promise not to tell anyone else?"

He could see she was trembling. "I promise."

"My father…is violent when people aren't as accomplished as he wants them to be. I've never been very accomplished."

"He hits you?"

She undid the jacket and let it fall from her shoulders, revealing bruises in startling shades of purple and green.

"Shit. Can't you go to the police?"

"There aren't any police in the Nether." She did her jacket back up again. "And they want to marry me off to a man I hardly know, and they don't care that I don't want to."

"Can't you run away again?"

“If I could, I would, but they keep me locked in my room and even if I could get away from them, there’s nowhere to hide from the magic they’ve got.”

“Holy crap, that sucks.”

“Reckon. Look, I know we don’t know each other very well, and I wouldn’t normally ask for help, but–”

There was no way he could ignore it. “What can I do?”

She breathed out in relief. “The Sorcerer is the only chance I have. I need his help, but he hates anyone from the Great Families.”

“I’ve got an idea,” he said. “This time, leave the talking to me, OK?”

“Deal. Thanks, Sam.”

“If you need somewhere to go in Mundanus when you first get away,” Sam added, “call me. Are you good at remembering phone numbers? I don’t have a pen.”

She nodded. “I have a phone too. I’m going to get it back as soon as I can so I’ll give you my number in case you need me.”

They exchanged mobile numbers and repeated them back to each other until confident they would be remembered.

“I’m sorry it was so horrible when he removed the Charm,” Cathy said. “I had no idea what it would be like.”

“It wasn’t your fault. Now let’s get the hell out of here. You need to hold my left hand,” he said and she did so.

There was a metal bolt sticking out of the back of the doorknob, like one that would normally go through a door to connect with the handle on the other side. He knelt down, pulling her with him, and thrust the bolt into the ground. He felt the earth beneath their knees vibrate.

“Quick,” she said. “I bet everything in Exilium can feel that.”

“Open,” he said, recalling the Sorcerer’s instructions, and turned the doorknob.

The outline of a door burnt into the grass around them and Cathy pulled him up and outside the rectangular shape. Before he could complain, the grassy door swung inwards, revealing the room below. The doorway appeared to have opened in the wall of the room.

“Oh, man, that breaks my brain.”

“It’s like Portal,” Cathy said.

They knelt down at the edge to peep in. It was dark in the empty ballroom they’d left, apart from a single lantern next to the wooden chair Cathy had been sitting in when he’d first been brought into the room. The sunlight in Exilium didn’t penetrate the gloom. He could see the Sorcerer was being cautious again, knowing that she wouldn’t be blindfolded when they came back.

“You know Portal, the Xbox game?” Cathy said.

“Never played it,” he replied. “How do we not break our necks?”

“We slide over this side.” She pointed at the edge that met the floor of the room. “When we’re through, gravity will sort out the rest. Come on.”

“You go first,” he said, unconvinced, and worried the Sorcerer would just abandon her in Exilium if he went first.

Cathy did as she’d described, for a moment looking like she was going to fall into the space, but instead landing on the ballroom floor, which, from Sam’s viewpoint, looked like a wall. A second after she’d landed Axon stepped out of the darkness with another strip of fabric.

“Sorry, Miss.” She must have recognised the butler’s voice, for she just sat there as it was tied.

Sam came through inelegantly and he heard a gentle *whump* behind him, which he assumed was the Way closing. Once the nausea had passed,

he opened his mouth to ask whether the doorknob would be left in Exilium but decided against it; they wouldn't answer anyway. He was sure the Sorcerer had thought of that.

Cathy was helped to her feet. Axon kept his hands on her upper arms.

"Was it a success?" Ekstrand asked, still dressed in his suit and cloak, reminding Sam of a stage magician.

"We're fine, thanks for asking."

"I can see that. Did the parasite lift the Charm?"

"Yeah."

"Excellent. Send his puppet back to the Censor. Tell her she cooperated."

"Wait, let her stay," Sam said and put his hand on her shoulder. "She's not like you said she would be."

"This is exactly what I feared," the Sorcerer rumbled.

"Check me out with your magnifying glass if you don't believe me. She didn't do anything to make me fall in love or any of that other guff."

Ekstrand did as he suggested. "You do seem to be free of anything obvious. Why do you want her to stay?"

"She can help us, we're going to need someone on the inside," Sam said. "The man who's missing is the most important person in Aquae Sulis, which is like Bath but in the Nether, right?"

Ekstrand nodded. "She told you this?"

"Yeah, she explained it all to me. And she knows what an Xbox is."

"A what-box?"

"Exactly! You said they aren't connected with my world, with Mundanus, but she is, and you know why? Because she was telling the truth when she said she isn't like them. Lady Rose sent these two weird, *weird* blokes to get the Master of Ceremonies, so if you want to find where he is, I

reckon the best chance you've got is getting our friend Cathy here to milk her people for information."

"Lady Rose is behind this?" The Sorcerer stroked his chin.

"And Rosas have come into Aquae Sulis for the season, two different families, for the first time ever," Cathy said. "It can't be a coincidence."

Ekstrand was frowning at her. Sam could feel her shaking beneath his hand. "See? Cathy can help."

"We have the right to make any enquiries we wish," Max said. "If we question the Rosas, they have to cooperate."

"Oh, come on," Sam said. "If their boss is anything like that Lord Poppy bloke they'll never tell the truth; they won't want to land themselves in the shit!"

"We can make them tell the truth," Max said. Sam believed him.

"But if they even get a hint of you coming after them, they'll cover their tracks," Cathy said.

"Yeah!" Sam agreed. "The lady's got a point. And if they know you're onto them, they might kill him, if they haven't already."

"I could spy for you," Cathy said. "I have to go to the same functions as these people; now I know their patron is involved I can look more closely into what they're doing. My father is on the Council of Aquae Sulis. I can find out more than the average person there."

"This is most unorthodox," Ekstrand muttered.

"That's why it'll work," Sam said. "They'll never see it coming. They'll never guess someone in their world is actually working for you. See?"

"He has a point, sir," Max said. "The puppet may well see and hear much more than we ever could."

"Will you please stop calling me that!" Cathy said. "Look, if I'm going to help you bust one of the Fae, I think it's only fair you help me in return."

“Nothing has changed,” Ekstrand said. “You must cooperate because of your obligation to the Censor.”

“Oh, God,” Cathy mumbled, lowering her head. “This is a nightmare.”

“Sir, a word?” Max said, hobbling to a corner, where Ekstrand joined him.

“Would you like to sit down, Miss?” Axon asked and Cathy nodded. Sam helped to guide her to the chair.

“Axon, could we have something to drink? I’ll make sure she doesn’t go anywhere.”

Axon looked over to Ekstrand who nodded. Sam was sure that, if he wanted to, Ekstrand could keep her in the room regardless of who was watching.

Once the butler was gone, Sam crouched in front of her and took her hand. “We’ll sort something out,” he whispered. “Maybe if I told them why–”

“No, I’m not going to play the bloody victim card to every single bloke I come across. I didn’t want to show you. It’s embarrassing enough.”

“Stop whispering,” Ekstrand said and Sam stood, glaring at him.

The Sorcerer crossed the room, stood closer to Cathy than he had before and scrutinised her through the magnifying glass again. Cathy shifted uncomfortably, sensing his proximity.

“You will help us to find the Master of Ceremonies, be he alive or dead,” he finally said, making her jump. “And you will do this to fulfil your obligation to the Censor. However, if you prove to be capable, and help us to achieve our goal – with the minimum of fuss and with absolute discretion – I will offer you a favour in return for the next time you help me.”

“You’re more like the Fae than I bet you want to believe.” Cathy sounded exhausted.

“Insulting me is hardly going to aid your case,” Ekstrand said.

“I just hope we can come to a mutually beneficial arrangement before the end of the season,” Cathy said.

“Why?”

“Because after that, your help is a lot less valuable to me.”

“We’ll see what happens,” Ekstrand said. “Now, Samuel, tell me more about these men you saw, every single detail, no matter how insignificant.”

“Can’t you take her blindfold off at least?” he asked.

“No.”

He sighed. “Sorry, Cathy.” She shrugged, but perked up at the sound of Axon returning with a clattering trolley of refreshments. Only Cathy accepted the offer of tea as Sam told them everything he remembered.

“So I think he must be dead,” Sam said when he’d finished. “That bundle didn’t move once.” He stuffed a tiny cucumber sandwich in his mouth, duty discharged.

“They could have used a Doll Charm,” Cathy said. “He wouldn’t have been able to fight back if they cast it on him unawares, and he wouldn’t have been able to move or speak.”

“Is that what happened to those people we saw in Exilium?” Sam asked but Ekstrand clicked his fingers.

“Focus!” he snapped. “The men you describe sound like the brothers Thorn to me. I’ll check once we’re done here. Now, pup–” He sighed. “Catherine?”

“Yes, Mr Sorcerer?”

“You said there are two Rosa bloodlines in Aquae Sulis for the season. Have you noticed anything about them so far?”

“The Albas brought an Indian princess to impress the Censor into letting them in. The Gallicas…well, there’s a rumour that they’ve found some

deeds to a Nether property. Everyone's going on and on about it."

"A Rosa owning a property in Aquae Sulis?" Ekstrand exclaimed. "Nonsense! The Irises and Papavers have too strong a hold over the Council of Aquae Sulis and the Corporation of Bath to ever let a Rosa in. They don't want their city to be overrun like Londinium was."

"Yeah, that's what people are saying, but the Gallica is smug enough for it to be true. If it is, you can bet your life they'll hold a party there to show it off."

"But it makes no sense," Ekstrand muttered to himself. "Why are the Rosas interested in Aquae Sulis? They've always been content with Londinium."

"It's too much of a coincidence," Max said. "You need to focus your attention on the Gallicas and, if you can get into this house, have a good look around."

"I'll get something for you to contact me should you find anything," Ekstrand said, and left.

"The Gallica bloke is a complete git," Cathy said in Max's direction. "He tried to kill a mundane in London."

Max frowned at that. "Did the London Arbiters intervene?"

"No, I saved the guy – that's not widely known, OK? The Rosa didn't seem to give a toss about the Arbiters showing up. It surprised me at the time actually. I guess you guys aren't as scary in London."

Max was silent then. Sam patted Cathy on the shoulder gently, wanting to reassure her but also wanting some contact with another person who felt just as nervous as him. She seemed to be dealing with it well. He wondered if she was panicking on the inside like he was. They were talking about things that were so outlandish he just wanted to go home and watch the football or have a takeaway, or both, something utterly normal in the world

as he understood it. Exilium already seemed unreal in his memory. Had he imagined that place, the fairie, the door in the ground? If not, were they going to let him walk away having seen it all?

Ekstrand returned, holding a large tube and a wooden lozenge. He handed it to Max. “When you take her back, explain how this works to her.”

“Are you sure, sir?”

“It’s protected, one use only. Even if she gave it to the Fae, they’d be unable to use it; I’ve keyed it to her with the hair I took earlier.”

“Yeah, about that,” Cathy began but Ekstrand didn’t let her continue.

“It’s time for you to leave now,” he said. “Once you find out anything that can connect the Gallicas to what happened to the Master of Ceremonies, contact me directly. Don’t go through the Censor, I don’t trust her.”

“What should I be looking for?” she asked as Axon took her sandwich plate.

“Anything that seems out of place,” Max said. “Keep an ear out for anything to do with these deeds and, if you get a chance, look around that house. Just don’t be obvious about it.”

“OK, I’ll do my best. Take care, Sam, OK?”

Axon gently took her hand and invited her to stand. “You too,” Sam said, wishing he could go with her. Preferably to a pub.

Once they’d left the house, Ekstrand called Petra back downstairs to the living room and, much to Sam’s surprise, she embraced him.

“I was so worried about you! What was it like?”

“Awful,” he said, and she responded with another longer embrace and back rubbing, like she’d known him for years. He tensed, unused to intimate contact from any woman other than his wife. Petra pulled away

without any of the embarrassment he was feeling and retrieved a notepad from one of the chairs.

Ekstrand filled her in and she made detailed notes as Sam paced in front of the fire, thinking about what Cathy had told him. Life in the Nether sounded like Victorian England, and he worried that Cathy was going to be hurt again before anyone helped her. Sam had no idea how to find her again, not that he felt he could really help. If he was completely honest with himself he didn't really want to get any more involved than he already was. He needed to get home and make sure his wife wasn't going crazy with worry. Their marriage had enough pressures upon it without all of this too.

"The Master of Ceremonies told me about every single property in Aquae Sulis and all of the houses there are accounted for, that's what I don't understand," Ekstrand was saying when Sam tuned back in. "None of them belong to the Rosas."

"Perhaps it's one he didn't know about," Petra suggested.

"Impossible."

"Perhaps he was lying to you," Sam said and was about to say his goodbyes when Ekstrand replied.

"Eminently possible, in fact, probable."

"If we can find a link between that property and the Master of Ceremonies, we have a motive for murder," Petra said, tapping her pen against her chin. "The Rosas would kill for a permanent ticket into Aquae Sulis."

"You mean they'd kill a bloke just to nick his house?" Sam asked. "Couldn't they just buy it from him instead?"

"You don't understand," Ekstrand sighed. "Nether properties can only be established by Fae or Sorcerers and the puppets can't do it. It requires ownership of a mundane property too, as the Nether version is simply a…

reflection of what exists in Mundanus. It can’t be conjured up out of thin air.”

“The Fae-touched of Aquae Sulis control ownership of desirable properties in Bath, and ones in the Nether, very strictly,” Petra added.

“Really?” Sam stuffed his hands in his pockets. “I’ve never heard anything about people stopping others buying houses. Surely that would come out in the press?”

“They own the press,” Petra said, smiling.

“This is one of those giant conspiracy theories, isn’t it?” Sam shook his head. “I don’t believe any of that stuff.”

“Do you think we would lie about this?” Ekstrand asked with a scowl.

Sam preferred him when he was being a teacher. The stage magician version of Mr Ekstrand was the wrong side of intense. “No, course not,” he said hurriedly. “It’s just a lot to take in.”

“Are you sure he’s worth the trouble?” Ekstrand directed the question at Petra.

“Yes, sir, but let’s keep focused on the house, shall we? Perhaps there’s something from the monitoring data that could give us something useful?”

“It would take months to review it,” the Sorcerer sighed. “Even if I set all of the apprentices to work.”

“Depends on what kind of data it is,” Sam said without thinking. When they both looked at him, he shrugged. “If it’s something that can be reduced to numerical values then a pretty basic script could analyse it. Most computers could handle something like that if there wasn’t too much d–”

“You mean you can actually do something useful with them?” Ekstrand looked shocked.

Sam smirked, at first thinking he was being sarcastic, but then he realised Ekstrand genuinely didn’t have a clue. “Have you ever seen a

computer?”

Ekstrand wrinkled his nose, as if Sam had just asked him if he ate puppies for breakfast. “Goodness no, why in the worlds would I want to do that?”

“So you don’t know what Mundanus is like these days then?”

“I know enough.”

“You realise computers do everything there now, don’t you?”

Ekstrand blinked at him, then shot a nervous glance at Petra. “Is he trying to unsettle me?”

“Let’s talk about Mundanus another time, Mr Ekstrand. I believe Sam was offering to help with the data problem.”

Sam patted the air. “I was just theorising. I need to go home. To my wife, and my job.”

“Do you have a computer at home?” Ekstrand asked. After Sam’s nod he said; “Excellent, then you can go home and write us this ‘basic script’, yes?”

“I don’t want to be rude, but I don’t work for you. I just took a leak behind the wrong tree at the wrong time, none of this is anything I want to be involved in.”

“But you are involved now,” Ekstrand said. “That can’t be undone.”

Petra stepped forward after she brushed the Sorcerer’s arm. “Sam, we don’t want to frighten you, but you’ve seen things that most people aren’t supposed to know about.”

“I won’t tell anyone,” Sam said with a nervous laugh. “No one would believe me.”

“There are rules, old rules outlined in a treaty that mean we have to be very careful here. I’d like to think we could make the best of the situation

by…finding a way to move forward that doesn't involve compromising your freedom."

Sam's heart raced. "I'd like that too. How about I sign a non-disclosure agreement? I signed one for work, I'm trustworthy."

"Petra, this is wasting time." The Sorcerer glared at Sam.

"If we reimbursed you for your time, and drew up an agreement, would you write a script for your computer to help us?" Petra asked, unfazed by the Sorcerer's menace.

Sam nodded, happy to agree just to make it out of the house. "What kind of data is it?"

"Lines on large rolls of paper," Ekstrand replied.

"Like data from a seismograph," Petra clarified.

"So we'd be looking for anomalies, right? I could write a script for that. If you want the results quickly I'd need someone to input the data for me because that's what will take the time. I'd tell them how to translate the readings. I could get that part set up whilst I work on the script. We could start today if you let me go home." He hoped he didn't sound too desperate. He was ready to promise a lot more if it meant they would let him go.

Ekstrand looked uncomfortable. "Petra, can you deal with this?"

"Of course, sir, but I doubt you want me to accompany Sam back to Mundanus?"

"Absolutely not, I'll send one of the apprentices with him."

"I'll take care of the details, sir," Petra reassured him, and the Sorcerer left with a flourish of his cape. Sam imagined dramatic old-fashioned film score music to accompany it.

"He's certainly eccentric," he said.

"He's a brilliant man," Petra replied. "Now, let me get that data for you and we'll make a plan."

27

Sam was not in the best mood when he finally got home. He'd been dropped off by Axon with several boxes of paper and Eagerboy, who was positively fizzing with excitement at his new assignment.

Axon assured him he'd delivered his note two days before, but there was no doubt that Leanne would be frantically worried by now. His returning home with a strange bloke on top of disappearing without warning wasn't going to help either. He'd spent the journey cooking up an explanation for the apprentice's strange manner and clothing, readying himself for the challenge, only to find the house was empty with a pile of post on the mat. Sitting on top was the note Axon had delivered.

"Lee?" he called up the stairs. Nothing.

He pointed the living room out to Eagerboy, whose name was actually Gordon, but he didn't suit it. "Go and take a seat, I'll be with you in a minute."

"Thank you," he said, eyes wide, darting from one thing to another so quickly he looked like he was about to have some sort of fit.

Sam went up the stairs, peered into the bedroom. The bed was made. He checked the wardrobes, imagining them filled with empty coat hangers, but all of her clothes were there. He breathed out, some of the tension easing. The memory of their last argument was still fresh.

He wanted to shower, eat, drink a beer and catch up on the football, but Eagerboy needed to be put to work before he started asking annoying

questions. Sam padded back down the stairs into the kitchen where he could smell something mouldy.

He flicked on the light and saw the saucepan from their aborted meal still on the stove, something green and fuzzy growing a new skin over the remains of the sauce. He opened the oven and saw the large dish, still full, where it had been left.

Leanne hadn't been home either.

Jaw clenching, he went to the hallway and saw the little red light flashing on the answering machine he always forgot to check. The display told him there were ten messages.

She'd left him? He pressed the play button and sat on the bottom stair, chewing a thumbnail.

"Sam, are you there? Look, I have to go to Brussels, something's come up and we need to fly there right now. I should be back late tomorrow, OK? We'll talk when I get home."

The date stamp was late that Saturday night. That was three days ago. The noise in the background suggested she was calling from her mobile somewhere noisy, like the party she was at perhaps.

Something came up? If it was Marcus he would–

The beep announced the next message. "Sam, did you get my message? We're at Heathrow. Are you sulking? Call me."

He fast forwarded to the last message. "It's Monday evening and we're on our way to the airport, I'll be back late tonight."

No "goodbye" or "love you" and no apologies. She would be home later and pissed off at him for not calling.

He was feeling pretty angry himself. He'd spent the weekend worrying about whether she was going crazy wondering where he was and the whole time she'd been swanning around Brussels with Marcus.

But he needed to think. There was a guy sitting in his living room who'd last seen Bath at the end of the First World War and it looked like Sam wasn't going to be able to extricate himself from it all as easily as he wanted. Petra had hinted that they might want to employ him but what did that actually mean? Would he have to go back to that asylum-like house and learn about stuff that sounded like it should be on kids' TV? As he sat at the bottom of the stairs in his average suburban house, the weekend felt more than unreal; it felt like the beginning of madness. Was that what this all was? He rubbed his scalp as the fear of going mad filled him. He'd been working hard, he was worrying about his marriage, he drank too much one night, banged his head and then maybe he'd just lost the plot. Maybe he'd spent the last few days in some random woman's house having the beginning of a nervous breakdown.

"Fuck," he whispered. He couldn't go to pieces now. Eagerboy wasn't a figment of a crazed imagination. He needed to be trained up and his wife would soon be home with questions.

He noticed his mobile on the shelf next the phone, abandoned after their argument. It had half a pip of power left and the voicemail symbol was flashing. He called her mobile and to his relief it went straight to answerphone.

"Lee, sorry I didn't call. Stuff came up at work for me too, and…well, I'm glad you'll be home soon. Love you."

He ended the call, looking at a photo of the two of them laughing hung on the wall next to him, wondering where that had been taken. Had they ever been like that? He couldn't remember the last time they laughed together. He couldn't remember the last time they did something other than the banal oiling of domestic life.

"You hungry, Gordon?" he called.

“Oh, yes, rather.”

“I’ll introduce you to pizza and beer,” he said. “I’ve got a couple of things to do first, OK?”

When he and the kitchen were cleaned up, pizza delivered and beers cracked open, Sam felt more ready to tackle Leanne when she arrived. In between bites of pepperoni, he fielded endless questions from Eagerboy, ranging from how they made the wireless send pictures as well as music (that was the television) and what the dipping-sauce tubs were made out of. There was effectively a whole time-travel-esque adventure happening for the guy sitting on his sofa, but Sam’s chief worry was what to tell work about being AWOL. He texted Dave to let him know he was still alive, and received a message back that he’d reported him sick to bail him out, thinking he was recovering from another bender. Sam smiled for the first time since he’d got home. At least someone was looking out for him.

Too tired to train Eagerboy in how to use a computer, he changed the channel for him and left him gawping at the latest Attenborough documentary. He was glad he only had an HD television; a 3D one could have given the guy an aneurysm.

As he was clearing the pizza boxes away, he heard Leanne’s key in the lock.

“Hello?”

“Lee.” He came and took two large bags from her and gave her a hug. She looked exhausted. “I’m sorry about Saturday.”

“OK,” she said, closing the front door. “I got your message – thanks. I was worried, you know.”

“Yeah…about that…”

“I have the most amazing news though,” she said, heading for the kitchen. “I’ve been given a promotion and we’re moving to London!”

“Eh?”

“We were at the party on Saturday and Marcus got a call from the Brussels office, all hell was breaking loose, and anyway, he asked if I would go and I said yes–”

“Like you always do,” Sam muttered but she didn’t hear him.

“–and before I knew it we were at Heathrow and I just haven’t stopped since.”

Sam tried to drive away the image of Marcus shagging his wife non-stop for two days in a distant hotel room.

She poured herself a glass of orange juice and gulped it down. “Planes always make me thirsty. So anyway, he was so impressed by how I handled it all he gave me the promotion on the spot. He’s starting a new department based out of the Canary Wharf HQ and he wants me to be a director! The salary is amazing. I’ll have a huge office and minions!”

“So…how long have you got before you need to accept or decline?”

She put the glass down. “What do you mean? I already accepted. I start next month. They’ll pay for our relocation and there are company-owned apartments that we can rent really cheaply. And not just any old crappy flats, they’re really swish, he showed me some pictures. This is it, Sam! We’re finally going to get the life we want!”

“*We* want?”

“Oh, crap, here we go. Can’t you just be pleased?”

“You didn’t think you should discuss it with me first?”

“We’ve always talked about moving to London.”

“Just talked about it. This is completely different.”

“How can I turn that kind of an offer down? We’ll live in–”

“Excuse me, but–” Eagerboy was at the doorway. Leanne yelped in fright.

“Leanne, this is Gordon. From work. I was about to tell you, he might be with us for a few days…see, this project has come up and needs extra hours so Gordon will be staying with us, OK?”

“Hello,” Leanne said to him uncertainly.

“Good evening,” he replied. “May I commend you upon a most impressive home.”

Leanne gave him the suspicious look Sam had been expecting.

“Is something wrong?” Sam asked.

“The gentleman speaking out of the televisual device has changed and started urging me to buy ‘car insurance’ but I have no car…I’m most confused.”

“Oh, OK, I’ll be there in a minute.”

Eagerboy went back to the living room. Leanne looked at Sam. “Where does he come from?”

“It’s a sad story actually. He grew up with his grandparents who were a bit weird, and they died and it turns out he’s this genius but he doesn’t know anything about the modern world.”

“And your boss sent this naïve genius home with you?”

Sam shrugged. “We’ve got a spare room and we’ll be pulling all-nighters.”

She closed her eyes and held her hands up. “You know what? I’m too tired to care. I need a bath and an early night.”

“What about this London business?”

“Can we talk about it tomorrow?” she said and yawned.

“Whatever.” She left him in the kitchen. He grabbed his machine and went to find Eagerboy. “Wanna see something cool?” He sat next to him and opened up the laptop. “This, my friend, is a computer. Before we get to work, let me introduce you to the internet, which is mostly funny pictures of

cats with captions and every flavour of porn the human mind can invent. Which would you like to see first?" He didn't mind which one Eagerboy chose; both were better than thinking about the state of his marriage.

Elizabeth pushed at the edge of Cathy's ball gown with a groan. "Mama, this is absolutely unbearable! My dress is being crushed by Catherine's monstrosity!"

"It's not my fault," Cathy said, reddening, trying to occupy as little of the carriage seat as possible.

"Elizabeth, stop fussing and be grateful that your sister finally took an interest in what she wears," their mother said.

"Typical that she chose the most inconvenient, most unfashionable shape there is!"

"The Censor wore a crinoline not three days ago," Mother said sharply. "And she made the most excellent point that, as the privileged, we should be able to pick and choose from amongst the best of the fashions. Crinolines may be less convenient, but they do give the impression of a tiny waist, and I think it's wise of Catherine to choose a style that draws one's eyes away from her face."

Cathy shook her head at her mother. She couldn't give a compliment without kicking the legs out from under it. She felt like a fool in the vast amount of burgundy satin, but it was the only way she could smuggle in the device the Sorcerer had given her to send a message. The tube was tied in a stocking and strapped to one leg, the capsule strapped to the other in its own stocking, using bandages she'd managed to trick the maid into giving her for a fake twisted ankle. The stockings gave the smooth surfaces enough grip to be held in place but she'd tied them so tight, for fear they would

slide down whilst she was dancing, that she had pins and needles in her legs. She just hoped she could remember how to use them; the Arbiter's hurried instruction had been given almost a week before.

Then she started to giggle. It was the nerves, and the simple absurdity of the situation; she was crammed into a carriage wearing a ridiculous gown with her hateful family, an illegal sorcerous artefact strapped underneath her hooped petticoat less than a metre away from her father.

"Stop that," he said and she chewed the inside of her cheek to drive away the urge.

"Papa, is it true that Lady Rose made the new Nether road to the Gallicas' house?"

"Her patronage was involved," he replied gruffly. Cathy had never seen her father in a good mood; it never coincided with her presence, but he was particularly sour this evening.

"And is it true that Horatio Gallica-Rosa will become a citizen of Aquae Sulis now?"

"That's for the Council to debate, not girls to gossip about."

"But it's important! I have to know whether to worry about Imogen catching his eye."

"The Albas are much more pleasant, if you must seek the attentions of a Rosa," Mother said.

"Oh, yes, William Iris seems very taken with them," Elizabeth said, aiming an acidic smile at Cathy. "Why, I've heard that he's been seen with them every day this week."

Cathy ignored her. She couldn't care less about what William Iris had been doing and who he'd been doing it with. She wondered whether Sam had managed to talk his way out of the Sorcerer's clutches yet. He seemed like a nice guy and he probably had a lovely wife. She imagined them going

to the cinema together and sharing the popcorn like she and Josh used to. She forced herself to focus on the conversation in the carriage.

“I wouldn’t trust any of the Rosas,” she said, thinking about what Sam had seen.

“Have you heard something?” It was the first interest Elizabeth had shown in what Cathy had to say.

Cathy tried her best to give the kind of enigmatic smile that Elizabeth would use in this situation.

“Are you feeling unwell?” her mother asked and Cathy gave up.

“I thought you liked Nathaniel Iris anyway.”

“Of course I do, I just need to be strategic,” Elizabeth said with all seriousness.

“Do you even know what that means?” Cathy asked, but Elizabeth was no longer paying attention.

“A new road, just to travel to your house, fancy,” Elizabeth breathed, looking out of the carriage window like an excited toddler. “Papa, if he becomes a citizen and Imogen marries him, I’ll never forgive you.” She was ignored for a comment that would have earned Cathy a stern word. “We’re there!” Elizabeth clapped, then grasped Cathy’s hand. “Don’t you dare do anything embarrassing tonight. Especially with that dress on.”

“If I do, I’ll make sure it’s when you’re nearby,” she replied. “I’d better get out first, don’t you think?”

Elizabeth gasped. “Is that why you wanted to wear it?”

Cathy was unable to think of a reply disparaging enough for her needs.

The footman helped her out, her mother wrestling with the crinoline hoops from behind. She took a few tentative steps, trying to ascertain whether the tubing and capsule were still where she’d strapped them. All seemed as well as it could be.

Tom and Lucy came soon after. There was a seemingly endless stream of carriages arriving; it was more like the first ball of the season than the average private ball. But this was far from average, and everyone wanted a glimpse inside the house that was the talk of the city.

Lucy waved at Cathy, who returned it as Tom goggled at her dress and then was prodded gently by his wife to escort her in.

Cathy walked with Elizabeth, following their parents into the grand entrance hall. It was slow going as the people ahead kept stopping to comment on the extravagant rococo décor. Cathy would have been bored senseless if she hadn't had a mission. When she thought about it that way she actually felt quite excited about the evening.

"Mr and Mrs Gallica-Rosa are here!" Elizabeth whispered. "I had no idea his parents were coming. I must get a closer look at his father."

"Why?" Cathy asked, worrying that Elizabeth was going to steer her over to the people she least wanted to meet. It wouldn't have been the first time.

"I want to see whether they age well."

"Oh, look, there's Nathaniel," Cathy pointed him out. "Is that Amelia Alba-Rosa he's talking to?"

"No!" Elizabeth hissed and abandoned her as swiftly as Cathy had predicted. It was time to disappear into the crowds.

Blending in whilst wearing a burgundy crinoline was slightly more difficult than she'd predicted. She was turning heads, without tripping or saying something inappropriate, and she hated it. She avoided eye contact as best she could, hurrying towards one of the darker corners at the foot of the staircase, trying to fathom out the layout of the house.

The majority of the guests were gravitating to a large set of doors on the right, and when she craned her neck she could see a huge ballroom lit by

startling numbers of sprites trapped in elaborate crystal chandeliers. That was the room Nathaniel had been heading towards, and most likely where William would be. He was the one she wanted to avoid the most. She was sick of the stilted greetings they had to endure every time they attended the same event, the bowing and hand-kissing and all the other subtle ways of reinforcing their positions in Society.

She imagined running up a few stairs, turning around to address the crowd below and shouting, “This is all bollocks!” as loud as she could. The fantasy made her smile for a moment, but she realised she was trying to avoid the inevitable. Time to be brave.

It was impossible to scuttle in the shadows in a dress the diameter of a small kitchen table, so she decided to brazen it out. Enough people were curious about the rest of the house to collect in little groups, drifting to doorways on the ground floor to peep through and comment on the stylish furniture. She tagged on to one of them, mimicking the behaviour of the nosey guests, realising it was exactly what she was supposed to be doing.

It was hard to determine if anything was out of place when there was such a riot of decorative extravagance everywhere she looked. The group had reached a size that was becoming more shameless about its intent, one lady at the front commenting that there should be a tour of the house as well as the ball. Another questioned whether it was possible for it to be one of the most desirable houses in Aquae Sulis when its anchor property was a school. Cathy knew the anchor property of that lady’s house was a hotel and couldn’t see why she felt that was any different.

“Good evening, Miss Papaver.”

The female voice was pleasant but unfamiliar. Cathy was dismayed to see that it had come from Amelia Alba-Rosa, who had fallen into step alongside her.

“Good evening, Miss Rosa,” Cathy replied.

“What do you think of the house?”

It was the question Cathy had been dreading. What should she say? “It’s…not to my taste,” she said, hoping that was inoffensive enough.

“Oh, I’m so glad you feel that way,” Amelia said. The jewels in her hair were the same colour as her eyes and the way she smiled made Cathy feel even less secure than usual. She was truly beautiful in a way she never would be, even more striking than Elizabeth. “I find it all rather over the top, don’t you?”

Cathy nodded with an uncertain smile. Why was Amelia talking to her? “I didn’t think you’d be here tonight,” she said, and immediately regretted it.

“Oh?”

“Well…it being a Gallica-Rosa house.”

“The Gallicas will show off to anyone they can, even those they don’t like,” she said. “In fact, I wouldn’t be surprised if Cornelius and I were top of their list. They must have been desperate to rub it in.”

“Does it bother you?”

“Not as much as they’d like. May I compliment you on your dress? So many people have commented on it.”

“Probably not in the way my mother would wish.”

Amelia laughed, making Cathy feel even more awkward, since she wasn’t trying to be funny. “Nonsense. And I’m sure it will work.”

“What do you mean?”

“Didn’t you wear it to impress Will?”

That made Cathy laugh a little too loud. “No! Why–” She cut herself off. Of course that would be a perfectly reasonable assumption for anyone else in Aquae Sulis. Then she realised what she’d called him. Perhaps there

was something in what Elizabeth had said. And, more than that, Amelia was making it clear to her; she'd never refer to him in such a familiar way by accident. "It was my dressmaker's idea," she lied.

"Well, I'm sure it will impress. You're very lucky to be engaged to him." Cathy's eyes widened at the intimacy of the comment and Amelia blushed in response. "I'm sorry, that was very rude of me."

"It's all right," Cathy said with a shrug, uncertain what to say and desperate to extricate herself from the conversation.

The group had moved down the hallway, the lady at the front encouraged by her peers to open one of the closed doors they'd come to. The ballroom din was now just a background rumble and the ladies at the front were tittering in excitement behind their fans.

"He's been so kind to my brother and me," Amelia said. "And I would like it very much if you and I could become friends."

Cathy stifled her first response of "why?" and forced herself to smile. "Oh, that's nice," she said, and winced at how it came out. "Look," she said, realising she didn't really care. "I'm not very good at this small-talk stuff."

Amelia's smile was sweet. "That's why we should be friends. It cuts out that bit of the conversation and gets right to the interesting things, don't you think?"

"I'm not very interesting," Cathy said as the group filed into the room with nervous laughter.

"I don't believe that for one moment," Amelia said, and Cathy had an awful feeling that something lurking beneath the surface of this conversation could rise up and bite her at any moment.

She glanced around the room, desperately looking for something to comment on, to shift the focus of the conversation. They were in a drawing

room, just as sumptuously decorated as everything else they'd seen. Cathy had the feeling something was missing about the house but couldn't identify what. She scanned the walls, hoping to find a picture to say something about, but they were all landscapes and dull as dinner conversations at her father's table.

Then her gaze fell upon the mantelpiece, upon a little pebble lost amongst the gilded statuettes and candlesticks. It was painted lavender blue and she knew it had a flower painted on the top. She'd decorated it herself when she was six years old, and given it to her uncle when he had fallen ill. He'd been so touched he'd kissed her on the forehead and said she had a good heart. She'd forgotten all about it.

That was the proof she needed. This house belonged to the Master of Ceremonies, the link the Sorcerer wanted to his disappearance. She had to tell him right away.

"Are you feeling unwell?" Amelia asked, brushing her arm with a gloved hand.

"Yes," Cathy said, seeing an opportunity. "I'm feeling a little faint. I'll go and find somewhere quiet to sit for a moment."

"I'll come with you."

"No. I…I mean, I would much rather you find William and tell him that I'll come and greet him when I'm recovered. Would you do that for me?"

"Of course," Amelia replied, actually looking concerned.

They left the room together. Amelia headed for the ballroom and Cathy went in the opposite direction down the empty hallway. The nosey guests were still in the drawing room and everyone else seemed to be at the ball. It was the perfect time.

She hurried to the end of the corridor and chose the last door on the right, knocking first before entering. She had to pull the hammer cord to

wake the sprite, revealing another lavishly decorated sitting room that smelt slightly musty. The room was on the other side of the house from the entrance, reducing the chances of curious visitors arriving late, seeing the light and wondering if there was a secret meeting at the other end of the house.

There was no way to lock the door. She considered jamming it shut with a chair but there were only plump Regency sofas in the room. She resolved to send the message as quickly as she could.

In a tangle of unravelled bandages, she finally freed the equipment and opened the capsule to pull out the piece of paper and pencil inside.

> *I have proof this house belongs to the MoC, absolutely positive. Most people in ballroom, come to rear window of room on left wing of house (as you look at it) – I'll hang a white bandage from it so you know which one.*
>
> *C x*

She had no idea why she'd put a kiss at the end, a habit from texting perhaps, but she couldn't rub it out. She rolled it around the pencil and dropped both back into the capsule, then, after resting it on one of the sofas, unwrapped the pipe part of the device from its stocking.

When the Arbiter had shown her how it worked, using a spare capsule, it had reminded her of the tube system she'd seen in a supermarket, used to send cash from the tills to some secret vault elsewhere in the store. They'd always made her think of the administrative system in the film *Brazil*, an observation that Josh had loved. She shut her eyes for a moment, wishing she could forget about him.

When she opened them again and looked at the runes engraved on the tube, she wasn't sure she could remember exactly what the Arbiter did. It

was something about placing it on a solid surface, non-metallic, she could recall that much, and then twisting it.

She shrugged, opting for a corner of the room the large rug didn’t reach. It wasn’t like she could ask anyone for a refresher lesson; she’d just have to do her best. What could possibly go wrong?

28

Will stood at the edge of the ballroom, watching the dancers sweep past, wondering where Catherine was hiding. Nathaniel was lurking with him, bored, and Imogen was in a sulk because Horatio Gallica-Rosa was dancing with Elizabeth Papaver.

“Why don’t you dance with Cornelius?”

“Don’t be such an idiot, William, you know Horatio hates him.”

Will sighed. “That’s the point.”

A smile burst across her face. “Oh!” she giggled and tapped him with her fan.

“Shouldn’t you be dancing with that fiancée of yours?” Nathaniel asked, tapping his foot out of time with the music.

“I have no idea where she is.”

“Lost her again? Careless.”

Will was about to reply when he saw Amelia enter the room. Unfortunately Nathaniel saw her too.

“Ah, the lovely white rose returns,” he said, straightening his dinner jacket.

“Don’t get excited, Nathaniel, it’s Will she wants,” Imogen said.

“Ah, but dear Will is marrying the poppy.” Nathaniel puffed out his chest. “A lovely thing like Amelia is definitely eldest-son material. Her parents wouldn’t waste her on a middle child. Just as well you’re already promised, eh, Will? Saves you the embarrassment of being rejected.”

Nathaniel stepped in front of him as Amelia approached. Will tried to not let his brother's jibes affect him. It was difficult, partly because he was right and partly because when Amelia was nearby he found it hard to keep his head.

"Good evening, Miss Alba-Rosa," Nathaniel said, bowing deeply with a click of his heels. He bent to kiss her hand and she saw Will standing behind him. Her expression transformed from one of patience to delight.

"Good evening," she said to Will, but Nathaniel thought otherwise.

"Would you do me the honour of partnering me for the next dance?" he asked.

"I'm sorry, Nathaniel, I need to speak to Will for a moment. Perhaps later?"

Will smiled at his elder brother as he stepped aside, bristling. Amelia guided Will away a few paces with the lightest touch on his arm.

"You look beautiful, Amelia."

"Thank you," she said, and smiled at him. "I have a message from your fiancée. She's feeling a little unwell, but has promised to find you once she's recovered."

"What ails her?"

"She was fine one moment, we were having a delightful conversation about the house and then she went as white as our rose. She looked… shocked, but for no reason I could ascertain."

"Was it something said about the house?"

"No. I think I commented on believing her to be an interesting person. That's hardly shocking, is it? I offered to go with her but she refused and sent me to you."

"Does she need me?"

Amelia considered it. “I couldn’t imagine how having you close could fail to make her feel better.”

She held eye contact with him long enough for the music to fade to a whisper and the crowd around them to pale into theatre scenery. Her lips were a deep dusky pink, slightly parted, and it took every last bit of his self-control not to kiss them.

“I should go to find her,” he said, stepping away reluctantly, disconcerted by the effect she had on him.

“She was in a room in the other wing of the house, quite far down the corridor,” Amelia added.

“I shall find you later?”

“You can always find me, Will. It’s one of your many talents.”

Will used the walk from the ballroom to cool down. He’d seen Amelia every day for the last week and the gaps in between each time seemed less easy to bear as the week went on. He would even call Cornelius a friend too, which surprised him, considering he’d started out with the intention of giving only the appearance of friendship to win Amelia over.

He had to be disciplined. Amelia was never going to be anything more than a friend. She was too beautiful, and her family too wealthy and powerful in Londinium, for her ever to be a mistress, and he was fated to marry Catherine. The two ladies couldn’t be more different. He felt like he was being spoilt by the finest champagne when he should be preparing to survive on bad wine.

There was no getting out of the engagement. His father had made it clear, so he just had to accept it and move on. He was still hopeful that once she was away from her abusive father Catherine might develop the confidence to make more of the little she had, but it was the optimism of a desperate man.

He passed a group of guests emerging from one of the rooms, chattering about the house, but Catherine wasn't amongst them. He peeped into the room they'd left but it was empty of people. They all seemed to be heading towards the ballroom, a few of them glancing at him with embarrassment at having been caught nosing about the place. He considered asking them if they'd seen her but decided against it. Catherine rarely caught anyone's eye.

He walked a little further. All of the doors off the hallway were closed. Then he heard a slight squeak from one at the far end, sounding like a window sash being forced, and then a thud as it was shut. He wondered if Catherine had climbed out, then dismissed the idea.

As he approached, he could hear her shoes on the wooden floor. She seemed mobile enough. When he reached the door itself, he could hear something distinctly odd, like a large jar being screwed shut.

He opened the door slowly, not wanting to interrupt the activity causing such a noise. Catherine was in the nearest corner, the perfect position to spy on from the door, wearing an uncharacteristically dramatic dress and holding a large wooden capsule. She was lining it up with the top of a tube, the opening of which was glowing with an ethereal light, the same light shining out from strange markings engraved into it. She dropped the capsule and it seemed to be sucked into the tube with a gentle "thunk", which caused her considerable relief.

"Catherine Rhoeas-Papaver, what in the worlds are you doing?" he asked, closing the door behind him without taking his eyes off her and the device.

She jumped and her hand flew to her chest as if she were trying to keep her heart within it. She darted in front of the tube, obscuring it with the voluminous skirts, her white face now regaining some of its colour. "William! I was…just about to come and find you."

“What is that you have there?”

“Nothing.”

He glanced at the window, recalling the earlier sound, and saw a length of white bandage trapped between the sill and window frame, the other half seemingly dangling out of the other side.

“What’s going on here?”

“None of your business.”

“It is my business.” His voice was getting louder as her behaviour angered him. “You’re my fiancée and your conduct reflects upon me as well as your family. What did you just do with that wooden capsule? Where did it go?”

“Get lost, William, this hasn’t got anything to do with you.”

“You’re clearly involved in something most irregular. Are you trying to sabotage the Gallicas’ event?”

“No!”

“Did you hear about the rumour Horatio’s been threatening to spread?”

“What rumour?” she asked, that brief flush of colour fading. She was frightened.

“That you’ve been living in Mundanus and that you’ve had an inappropriate relationship with a mundane man.”

She was shaking again. “This hasn’t got anything to do with that,” she said. “And anyway, he’s just saying that because he’s angry with me.”

“Why is he angry with you?” He noted, even as he asked the question, that she hadn’t denied it.

“It doesn’t matter!” she said, flicking a strand of hair away from her eyes. “It really doesn’t have anything to do with this, OK? Just… can you just please leave me alone?”

He took a step towards her. “Let me see that pipe.”

“No. It’s none of–”

He pushed her aside, revealing the tube, but its glow was fading rapidly. He peered into the top; it looked like the pipe reached a long way down. Inspecting where it joined the floor, it seemed bizarre that such a thing would be placed there, in a corner of an obscure room in a patch of parquet flooring. He’d never heard of such a thing, had never seen anything like it at the Emporium, and had never come across any talk of it on the Grand Tour. Whilst he was prepared to assume he didn’t know about every artefact in existence, he was certain he’d at least have heard about something like this.

“William, really, just leave it alone.”

He checked the outside of the tube, ignoring her attempts to draw him away. When she tried to approach he held her back with a firm grip on her shoulder. There were no symbols he recognised, not one sigil of the Great Families. It looked utterly alien.

“Is this a sorcerous artefact?” he asked her and her throat blazed red.

“No,” she said. At least she was an appalling liar; it would make married life so much easier.

“What does it do?”

“Bugger off, for God’s sake, this is nothing to do with you.”

“If you don’t tell me what’s happening here, I will go to Horatio myself and tell him you’re using illegal sorcerous artefacts in his house.”

“You wouldn’t do that,” she said confidently. “You’re too scared of a scandal.”

“Perhaps you would prefer me to go to your father? Perhaps this is just the occasion you’ve been wishing for. A disgrace such as this would free you of our engagement most conveniently.”

It was a gamble: she would be tempted, and he was under strict instructions to maintain the engagement no matter what. But he suspected her fear of her father was the greater force. She sagged and he knew he'd won, but he didn't let her go. Instead, he relaxed his grip and chose to follow up the threat with a different approach. She was stubborn but he suspected that having been frightened by the threat of her father's wrath she'd be more pliable for a moment at least.

"If that is a Sorcerer's artefact, it's clear you're involved in something very serious. I don't have to be the enemy, Catherine. If this is a burden, I could help."

Her face softened, the defensiveness eroded away by his words. "If I tell you, do you promise not to tell anyone else?"

"Will I be able to keep that promise and not jeopardise my family's interests?"

She looked surprised by his question, as if the need to ask hadn't occurred to her. "Yes."

"Then I promise. Why don't we sit down? It seems to me that you've been under a great deal of pressure lately. Does it have something to do with a Sorcerer?"

She nodded, letting out a long sigh. "I don't have anyone I can talk to. And this is big stuff, William, I mean it."

He let go of her shoulder, planning to steer her towards one of the sofas, but she hurried to the tube instead. "I have to do this first," she explained, appearing to unscrew it from the floor, making the last of the glow disappear. When it detached there was no hole; the parquet was pristine. In moments, the tube started to collapse. She put it on the floor and it crumbled to dust.

She brushed her hands and allowed him to guide her to one of the sofas. She took a moment to arrange the dress as she sat down, irritated. “I hate this stupid dress, I only wore it so I could smuggle the messaging tube in.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“I had it strapped to my legs,” she said, and then started to laugh. “Oh, God, you look so shocked.”

“Well, it is rather strange. Start at the beginning.”

“The Censor came to pick me up for tea, but instead she delivered me to an Arbiter. I was blindfolded, dumped in a car boot and held prisoner in the Sorcerer’s house until I agreed to help get a Fool’s Charm lifted off a mundane. I had to take him into Exilium and it was absolutely awful.”

Will made no effort to disguise his shock. “When did this happen?”

“A week ago. It turns out this guy witnessed Lady Rose’s people carrying my uncle out of the house wrapped in one of his rugs. They charmed him to forget, but the Arbiter tracked him down.”

“Why didn’t they just kill him?”

She shrugged. “Something to do with his wife, I think. Their wedding ring or something. Anyway, once we knew it was the Rosas, I told the Sorcerer about this new house and he suspected it was connected. He gave me that tube thing to send him a message if I found proof that it is.”

“So I assume you did?”

“Yeah. I saw something the Rosas missed. It only means something to me and my uncle. This is his house. He must have kept it a secret, that’s why there was no road connecting it to the rest of Aquae Sulis until Lady Rose made one for this party.”

Will caught hold of her hands. “You realise how serious this is, don’t you?”

“Of course I do,” she said, frowning at his contact. “I’m not stupid. I didn’t want to get involved but the Censor made me, and the Sorcerer seems just as motivated to find out what happened. They want to get more evidence before they bust the Rosas. The Arbiter will be on his way. He’ll be coming in through that window.” She pointed to the one with the bandage hanging out.

“But the servants go past there to get to the kitchens from the ballroom,” he said, standing up.

“I thought we were at the end of the house,” she said, chewing a thumbnail in a most unladylike manner.

“We’re at the end of the *Nether* house,” he said. “The kitchen block is in Mundanus; the entrance is about ten metres that way. I only know because my mother remarked upon it earlier. She liked the fact that the servants didn’t have to come through the house to serve the champagne.”

She watched him point and stood up too. “Bugger. I’ve really ballsed this up.”

He blinked. She sounded like a mundane. The more he spoke to her, the more he suspected Horatio was telling the truth. But there wasn’t time to tackle that now. He needed to use this information in the best way possible. Helping the Arbiter would result in the social destruction of Horatio Gallica-Rosa, a definite bonus. He had the suspicion that Horatio had been biding his time, waiting for the best stage upon which he could perform and do the most damage with the information about Catherine. Tonight would be ideal, and Will knew it would force him to call Horatio out to protect her honour, exactly as Cornelius had warned.

But there were other factors involved. He had to act quickly to minimise the damage to the others who could be dragged down with the Gallica-Rosas.

“I’ll do my best to cause a distraction,” he said, formulating the plan as he strode to the door. “Give me five minutes, then go round the back, grab the nearest servant you find and pretend to be distressed. Tell them something is happening in the ballroom and to get help. That should bring the Head Butler and the rest will want to watch. Then make sure the Arbiter gets in and isn’t disturbed.”

“What are you going to do?”

He sported his most wicked grin. “I’m going to get myself in the most appalling trouble. I’m counting on you to help the Arbiter destroy Horatio, Catherine, otherwise this may end up being my last ball.”

29

Max approached the mundane anchor property, reviewing the information he'd received from the Sorcerer. It seemed the mundane could be useful now the Fool's Charm had been lifted; over the past week he'd managed to analyse all of the data and pinpoint the house he now stood in front of as the likeliest candidate for the secret Nether property. Its reflection was just within the city boundary, but far enough from the centre of Aquae Sulis to have gone unnoticed by the rest of the residents.

The data had revealed activity every Wednesday evening up until the night of Lavandula's disappearance. Two hours after Sam's encounter in the garden, someone had opened a Way into the secret property and spent three days there, then it had been silent until a frenzy of activity for the last two days. The movements in and out of the Nether suggested the house was being prepared for a grand event, one that was happening in the reflection of the property he was looking at.

The Sorcerer had passed on the puppet's note. Max hoped she was right as he walked the outer perimeter of the mundane grounds considering the best way to approach the house. He decided upon entering the Nether through the garden wall and then sneaking to the window she mentioned. He'd only ever snuck into a Nether property a handful of times before; the direct approach was much easier.

He found a spot sheltered by large bushes and rummaged in his pockets for the Peeper. His remit was to find the Master of Ceremonies and bring him back, preferably alive. There was no way to predict what he'd have to

deal with to achieve that, but at least he was off the crutches and on to a walking stick, which was much easier to manage. His leg still ached like hell though.

His fingers closed around the Peeper and he pulled it out. The lens took up most of the circular device, consisting of two soapstone circles that fitted around the lens, each with its own formulae engraved onto them. A quick polish with the end of his coat belt cleared away the pocket lint.

He pressed the Peeper against the brick closest to his eye level and twisted the two circles in opposite directions. It clicked gently until the formulae were aligned and then the silver grey light of the Nether shone through the wall, through the lens. He leaned in close, peering through, catching sight of several servants hurrying across the back garden, chattering and looking excited. None of them had noticed the little flap of white hanging from the window at the end of the wing. So the puppet had been telling the truth, about the bandage and the window at least. He couldn't see if anyone was in the room as the curtains had been shut.

He whistled softly and the gargoyle came out from its hiding place nearby. "I'm not a bloody dog, you know," it grumbled as it squeezed through the shrubs to sit on its haunches next to him.

"Something's going on," Max said, looking back into the Nether. "Looks like it's distracting the staff. Could be an advantage. I can see the bandage. The window is about ten metres away on the other side of this wall. I'll go across first, then you follow."

"No, I'll go across first, open the window and then help you in, stupid," the gargoyle replied. "No point you faffing about with that stick when I can go faster and help you climb through."

"Agreed," Max said. "Why are you so bad-tempered?"

“*We* are bad-tempered because we have to tit about here when we need to go to the Cloister. There’s something about what happened there that doesn’t add up.”

Max twisted the circles in the opposite direction until mundane brick showed through the lens again and the Peeper detached. “We’ll go there soon. It has to be made safe.” He dropped it back in the bag and retrieved the Opener.

“That’s what comes of being dislocated from your soul,” the gargoyle said, looking at the small doorknob and its bolt. “None of our tools have interesting names. No imagination.”

“I have imagination,” Max said, inserting the bolt into the mortar, the formulae inscribed upon it changing its consistency to that of butter. “I can imagine just how wrong this will go if that puppet has lied to us.”

“What motivation would she have for doing that?”

“They don’t need to be motivated,” Max said, adjusting the brim of his hat and picking up his cane from where it rested against the wall. “They can’t help it. Lying is like going to the bathroom for them, regular and necessary.”

“Only someone with a dislocated soul would think that’s a good analogy. Are you going to open a Way or not?”

Max twisted the doorknob and the outline of a doorway formed, looking like a line of burnt brick for a moment, then like a door frame. In seconds a door had formed in the brickwork. He opened it a crack, checked for any straggling staff and then waved the gargoyle through. He watched it bound across the grass in seconds, open the window and climb in before Max had a chance to detach the Opener. When it beckoned to him he stepped through and let the temporary brick door shut behind him, then dropped the warm doorknob back into his pocket. He hobbled across to the window as quickly

as he could and accepted the gargoyle's help. He pulled up the bit of bandage and shut the window.

"Holy crap! I never knew Sorcerers could make walking gargoyles."

He twisted around, seeing the puppet he'd packed into the boot a week ago.

"That doesn't go further than this room," Max said, tidying himself after the scrabble over the windowsill.

"Does it feel like stone? Can I touch it?"

The gargoyle grinned at Max. "I reckon I've scored here."

She yelped and knocked an ornament off a table that smashed on the floor. "It can talk? Oh, my God, that's amazing!"

The gargoyle moved towards her slowly, like a panther hunting its prey. "Your dress might look like a lampshade but you got better taste in gargoyles."

"I had to wear this stupid thing to smuggle in the messaging tube."

The gargoyle stopped when its paws brushed the hem of her dress. She reached out and touched the top of its head with her fingertips as something like a purr rumbled deep in its gullet. "You can do that all day if you like," it said and she laughed, reaching behind its ear to tickle it. Stone eyebrows twitched with pleasure.

"When you've finished, we have work to do," Max said.

The gargoyle rolled its eyes. "Sorry, babe, he's a slave driver."

Max put on the knuckle-duster and the puppet's eyes flashed terror. "I did everything you asked!"

"This isn't for you," Max said. "This is to look for openings between the worlds or between residencies. The Rosas connect all their provincial properties with a London residence as standard, and my bet is that they've done that here too."

“But I thought they took the Master of Ceremonies into Mundanus.”

“Only to transport him is our guess,” the gargoyle said. “It would have been easier to hide. But they’ll be hiding him in Londinium if he’s still alive.”

“You think he might be?”

It shrugged its stone shoulders. “Depends on how they want to use him. If all they wanted was this house, then no. If they wanted more, maybe. You worried about him?”

“He’s my uncle.”

“Don’t worry, sweetheart.” The gargoyle stroked her arm with a claw. “We’ll find him.” It noticed Max. “What?”

“You talk too much.”

“I like her,” the gargoyle said, tilting the top of its head back towards the puppet, hopeful for another stroke. “She has a face I can trust. Not too pretty.”

“Thanks.”

The gargoyle responded to the sarcasm with another of its scary grins. “That’s a compliment from me, babe.”

Max knew the way through to the Londinium house was likely to be in one of the rooms furthest from the ballroom, and would be disguised. It would also be the first place a visitor from Londinium would see, so it would be decorated to impress.

“Have you seen many of the rooms in this wing of the house?” he asked the puppet, who was looking, too closely for his liking, at the formulae inscribed on the gargoyle.

“A few.”

“Any stand out?”

“In what way?”

“Was one more elaborately decorated than the others?”

“All of this place is like that,” she said. “Something’s missing but I can’t put my finger on it.”

“Do you think the same about this room?”

She looked around. “Yeah,” she said finally.

The gargoyle did the same. “She’s right. This is supposed to be a Rosa house, right?”

Max nodded. “It’s the lack of roses.”

The puppet snapped her fingers. “That’s it! There are a few vases of them, but in my house there are poppies in all kinds of obscure places, and really subtle things too, you know, like in the cornice designs, or at the corners of framed paintings. There’s nothing like that in this room.”

“They’ve stripped out the lavender motif, in fact…” He studied the cornice in the corner nearest to him, noticing the lavender sigil embedded in the design. “What does that look like to you?”

She examined where he was pointing. “Oh, I was wrong, there is a rose. Damn.”

“It’s actually a lavender sigil glamoured to look like a rose, but they haven’t had time to do a thorough job. They’ve covered the things they couldn’t replace quickly enough, or would have to remodel in a major way, and they’re still replacing the rest.”

“Oh!” The puppet jumped in the air, making the dress bounce. “It’s not just that! All of the paintings are landscapes. There aren’t any portraits!”

Max nodded. “Temporary generic pictures…to glamour every single one in this house would cost a fortune, much cheaper to simply ship out the Lavandulas and replace them with harmless landscapes. Good. Now, think carefully, have you seen a room with something very obviously Rosa-themed in it?”

She shook her head. “But I haven’t seen all of them.”

“Go and check them, quick.”

“I’ll help,” the gargoyle offered.

“No, if she’s caught going in and out of rooms, she could talk her way out of it. You couldn’t.”

The gargoyle looked back at her. “Wanna see if you could smuggle me under your dress?”

“No,” she said firmly and opened the door to peep down the hallway. “I’ll be as quick as I can,” she said and hurried out.

“You should be more careful around her.” Max flexed his fingers to ease the knuckle-duster into a more comfortable position.

“She’s OK, for one of them.”

“Just because she scratched behind your ears doesn’t mean she’s trustworthy.”

“She didn’t run away screaming or faint, she thought I was ‘amazing’. Doesn’t that prove she’s not like the rest of them?”

“It proves she’s easily impressed, nothing more.”

The door opened again and she beckoned them frantically. “I’ve found something!”

The puppet led them across the hallway and into the room opposite. As soon as he saw it, Max knew this would contain the Way to Londinium. Every detail of the décor featured a variety of rose motifs; the wallpaper and its rose design looked new and there were vases of dramatic floral arrangements featuring the red rose of the Gallicas. On the right hand wall there was a huge painting of Lady Rose, giving him the first place to focus: on the wall opposite.

“That will be the first thing they want people to see when they come through,” the gargoyle said, pointing at the painting.

“I know,” Max said, lifting up the rug and examining the wooden floorboards. He found the tell-tale scrapes in the varnish he was looking for. “This looks perfect to you, I assume?” he said to the puppet.

“What am I supposed to be looking for?”

“Glamoured again,” he muttered. “This is it.”

He knocked gently on the nearest bit of wood panelling with the knuckle-duster, listening closely for a tell-tale echo. It would be fainter than one caused by knocking on an anchor property’s door, but it would still be there.

“Keep watch,” he told the puppet. “Make sure no one comes in here.” A metre to the left of the scrape marks the echo came back. “I’ve found it,” he said and the gargoyle rubbed its paws together, making the sound of a pestle and mortar.

“Let’s go break some stems,” he said, grinning.

Once his father had been covertly warned that something ugly was likely to happen, and that he would have it under control, Will sought out Horatio Gallica-Rosa. He was in one of the rooms adjacent to the ballroom where refreshments were being served. As soon as he saw the Wisteria twins flanking him near the punchbowl, Will knew it was the perfect time and place, but he still had to take care to emerge from the evening socially unscathed. He hoped Horatio would leap at the chance to accuse Catherine publicly without any need for baiting.

“Glass of punch, old boy?” he said to Oliver, believing that if Horatio saw a friend with him he’d be all the more eager to cause a scene.

“Rather,” Oliver said. “I say, Amelia Alba-Rosa is quite delicious, isn’t she?”

“Mmm.” Will was more focused on the challenge ahead.

“Any chance you could put in a good word for me?”

Will looked at his friend. “Are you hoping to catch Amelia’s eye?”

“Is there a man in this room who wouldn’t want to?”

“We’ll talk about it another time,” Will said, and fixed a smile on his face as he approached the table.

“Ah, the very man himself!” Horatio cheered, handing the ladle to Will. “Good evening.”

“Good evening, Mr Gallica-Rosa,” Will said, accepting the ladle as he unhooked a dainty crystal cup from the edge of the punchbowl. “May I congratulate you on your property, sir. It’s a magnificent house.”

“Isn’t it? My parents have always said you can tell the worth of the man by the property he owns. Now I most definitely agree.”

The Wisteria twins chortled on cue. Will poured the punch into the cup.

“And I don’t think that’s restricted to one’s house,” Horatio continued, in a voice loud enough for the entire room to hear, as well as those around the punchbowl. “One’s cufflinks can speak a thousand words…a well-tied cravat speaks volumes…of course all of these pale in comparison to the worth one can infer from a man’s wife. Or fiancée.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” Will said. “Although I do beg to differ on one point. A well-tied cravat says more about a man’s valet than about his personal worth.”

Horatio smirked. “A good point. I find it fascinating that your cravat is so expertly tied when your fiancée is such a poor choice. What a shame your family has the ability to find good staff, and yet not find a good wife for you, sir.”

“I beg your pardon?” Will said, setting the cup down.

“I was simply commenting on the curious situation you find yourself in. An excellent valet, a wayward, rebellious woman of dubious moral character as a fiancée. Seems rather backwards to me.”

“How dare you speak of my fiancée in such a way,” Will said. Even though he’d been expecting it, having heard the words he was amazed by how furious he felt. “I demand you apologise immediately.”

The guests within earshot had fallen silent. Out of the corner of his eye, Will could see Thomas Papaver paling, and Nathaniel’s eyes wide with shock.

“I never apologise for speaking the truth sir,” Horatio said. “If you are foolish enough to stand by a girl who simply isn’t fit for Society, I fear the problem lies with your poor judgement, not with my plain speaking.”

“For the sake of good manners, sir,” Will spoke in a calm, steady voice, projecting it as far as he could, “I ask you again to apologise for the insult you speak against my fiancée and my family, otherwise I will be forced to seek satisfaction.”

“And I say again, sir, that I will not. Even my patron supports my views of Catherine Papaver as a loose woman with far too much affection for Mundanus. And its menfolk.”

Surrounded by gasps and murmurs, Will straightened up. “Not only do you insult the honour of my fiancée and my family, you disgust me, sir. If you will not apologise, I am left with no choice but to defend their honour in the only language I suspect you will understand.”

“A conversation with our swords, perchance?” Horatio sneered.

“Indeed, sir. Name your second and I will name mine.”

Horatio cast his eye about the room, drawing out the moment, leaning casually against the table as he did so. “I name…Oliver Peonia as mine.”

“I beg your pardon!” Oliver spluttered.

Horatio abandoned his theatrical ease, giving the Peonia a hard stare. “That isn’t going to be a problem, is it, Oliver?”

He tugged at his cravat, gave a frantic, fearful look at Will. “I’m dreadfully sorry, old bean. It seems I must.”

“And I will be seconded by my brother, Nathaniel Iris,” Will said, eliciting a firm nod from his brother who came to his side.

“Afraid to pick a fight with me, Rosa?” Nathaniel said. “I find it laughable you choose to insult my younger brother. It seems you haven’t the stomach to face me after all.”

“If you had been betrothed to a whore, I would have been delighted to speak the truth to you and answer for it,” Horatio replied and Nathaniel took a step towards him in fury.

“May I suggest we withdraw to discuss terms,” said Oliver, stepping between them, “before this gets any worse?”

“An excellent suggestion,” Nathaniel said through clenched teeth.

He steered Will out of the room, through the ballroom and into a corner of the lobby. “You did the right thing,” he said.

“I did the only thing I could,” Will replied, irritated by the way Nathaniel patronised him even when he was trying to be supportive.

“Now, I want you to agree that I should fight in your stead.”

“Absolutely not.”

“Will, I’m the superior swordsman and I’ve been told the Gallica always fights to the death. He’s never lost a duel.”

“Then I’m surprised at your eagerness, brother,” Will lied.

“There’s no doubt I would beat him. His reputation was forged in Londinium, and everyone knows there isn’t a decent swordsman within a fifty mile radius of Buckingham Palace. He thinks he’s a big fish; he just doesn’t realise it’s by virtue of growing up in a tiny pond.”

Thomas Papaver signalled his approach with a clearing of the throat. “I beg your pardons,” he said, bowing slightly to them both. “I wanted to thank you for your response to the Rosa’s insults. If there is anything I can do to assist, please, do not hesitate to ask.”

“Thank you,” Will said, seeing Thomas’ wife hurrying down the corridor, presumably sent to find Catherine. He hoped that whatever the Arbiter needed to do had been completed. “Actually, I’d be very grateful if you could ask Oliver to come and speak to me as soon as he can.”

“As your second I should negotiate the time and place, not you,” Nathaniel said.

“I don’t want to talk to him about that,” Will replied and looked back at Thomas. “If it’s not too much trouble? I’d like things to settle down in there before I go back.”

“Of course,” Thomas said, and took his leave.

“I’ll push for it to be the day after tomorrow,” Nathaniel said. “Then you can sleep in and I’ll give you a refresher in the rapier and sabre. I hear he favours the rapier, but he may try to catch you out as everyone knows his preference. He’ll suspect you’re a poor enough swordsman for him to risk fighting with the weapon he uses less.”

Will nodded, not really paying attention to the details. If all went to plan, Horatio wouldn’t be around to see the duel, his reputation so thoroughly destroyed that the things he’d said about Catherine would be discredited by association.

“Are you listening to me?”

He blinked at Nathaniel. “I do apologise, I was thinking about what he said.”

Nathaniel nodded, rested a hand on his shoulder. “It’s best to put that to the back of your mind and focus on how to put him down.”

Will smiled at that, heartened by Nathaniel's support. Then Oliver arrived, red-faced and sweaty. "I'm dreadfully sorry," he said, unable to look at Nathaniel and barely able to make eye contact with Will.

"Nathaniel, could you leave us for a moment?" Will gave him as reassuring a smile as he could and watched him go. "Would you believe he's actually being quite decent about this?"

"More than could be said for me," Oliver mumbled.

"Now, Oli, I suspect we don't have a great deal of time, and I need you to be frank with me. What does Horatio and his family hold over you and yours?"

Oliver winced. "Please don't ask me that, old chum."

"I wouldn't unless it was absolutely imperative I know. It's been clear from the moment we got back home that something is awry and, from the way you caved into his demand to be his second, I can only assume it's something very serious indeed."

"It is," he said, lowering his voice even though they were alone. "So much so that I can't tell you without breaking a solemn promise to my family."

"It's for the very sake of your family that I ask."

Oliver studied his face, then shook his head. "I hope I don't regret this. I wouldn't tell another soul, Will, but you and I, we've been through some scrapes, I know I can trust you. It seems my parents didn't have all of the funds necessary to finance my Grand Tour. They borrowed. Heavily. I'm sure you can guess who offered them the loan?"

"The Gallicas."

"They really are as bad as the rumours suggest. My father agreed terms and shook on it, as a gentleman. But Horatio's father demanded repayment before the agreed time, knowing full well my family couldn't afford it.

Then he offered Father the opportunity to repay the debt in an alternative manner: Horatio being sponsored in for the season."

"And holding you over a barrel in the process." Will rested a hand on his friend's shoulder. "I'm dreadfully sorry, old chap. Must be miserable at home."

"It is rather," Oliver admitted. "I was so furious with them for borrowing above their means. I have no idea how the Gallicas got involved in the first place, but my parents certainly regret it now."

"They wanted to give you the best experience they could."

"They wanted me to have a chance to break into higher Society, Will, let's be honest. I'm sure they saw my friendship with you as a ticket to improving the family's profile. I just had no idea the lengths they were prepared to go to." His brow creased. "I hasten to add that's not the reason I'm your friend, Will. In fact, one of the reasons I find it so easy to be a chum of yours is that we can forget these things and simply get into scrapes and laugh about it later. I often forget how important your family is."

"Don't you fear, I know you're not a climber, Oli. Now, I need to speak to the Censor. And don't worry, old chum, I think this sorry state of affairs is going to improve sooner than you might think."

"Is this when I should express my doubt and you tell me to trust you?"

Will grinned.

"I see," Oliver nodded. "Well, then, I'll just leave you to it."

30

Cathy watched the wood panelling slide into place and any hint of there having been a door disappear. Moments later she heard someone knocking gently, nearby.

“Cathy? Are you in there?”

It was Lucy. Tom had probably sent her to avert parental wrath.

She went to the door, wondering what was happening to the Arbiter and the gargoyle, whether her uncle was still alive. Then she took a deep breath and opened it.

“I’m in here.” She did her best to smile as she waved Lucy to join her.

“Are you OK?”

“Just felt a bit faint. What’s happened?”

“William just challenged Horatio Gallica-Rosa to a duel.”

“Whoa. I mean, goodness!” She listened to Lucy’s account, trying to decide whether she was impressed by William’s diversionary tactic or not. Was that really what he’d planned? “And William didn’t bait him?”

“Not at all, in fact, he did all he could to defuse it. But the Rosa said some terrible things about you, Cathy. Thomas is really very upset.”

“I’m sure it’ll be all right,” Cathy said, satisfied that Will had successfully done as he’d promised.

Lucy was aghast. “Don’t you understand? Horatio accused you of sleeping with men in Mundanus, I’m certain everyone in that ballroom is talking about it right now. Your parents are going to be beside themselves.”

“My father knows it’s a lie,” Cathy said, sobered, but still confident that if the Arbiter succeeded, whatever the Rosa had said would soon be forgotten.

“Even so, it’s going to be tough in there when–”

A bang from the room above interrupted her. “A window being shut?” Cathy asked her and Lucy shrugged. Then there was another, this time from the opposite side of the corridor, an accompanying squeak of wood confirming her suspicion. The window of the room they were in opened by itself, just a few inches, then slammed shut. The clasp at the top of the lower sash flipped over and locked itself. There was the sound of others slamming shut, getting progressively quieter as the closing of windows seemed to run down the length of the house.

Speechless, the two of them rushed into the hallway to see servants and guests screaming as they ran down the stairs and out of various rooms, a few of the guests looking rather dishevelled, with several cravats being hurriedly tied.

Lucy caught hold of her hand and seemed genuinely frightened. Cathy suspected it was something to do with the Arbiter, which was just enough to keep her calmer than most of the people around them. They gravitated towards the lobby, the same direction everyone else was heading, the instinct to herd together strong. The large front doors, which had been still open for any late arrivals, slammed shut with a terrific bang. Everyone, Cathy and Lucy included, screamed and ran into the ballroom.

The music stopped as the windows running along the room all opened, shut again and locked in sequence. Last, the double doors into the ballroom itself slammed shut, eliciting screams from those nearest to them. The head of the Gallica-Rosas appealed for calm, but his voice was drowned out. His son Horatio was silent and white-lipped.

Tom rushed over and put his arms around both of them as a loud booming knock made the ballroom shake and the chandeliers tinkle as they quivered. A second knock followed as women whimpered and servants cowered in corners. Tom's arm crushed Cathy to his side and he kissed the top of Lucy's head.

"It'll be all right," he whispered.

Cathy searched the crowd and her eyes locked with William's. He gave her a smile and raised crossed fingers. She smiled back, noticing Amelia on his right and the Censor on his left, looking remarkably composed.

The third knock was the loudest, echoing throughout the house. A glass shattered on the other side of the room and a woman fainted as a haze formed in the air at the centre of the ballroom, like the shimmering above a road in the heat of a Mundanus summer. Everyone pressed back to the edges of the room, then, with a terrifying thunder-like crack, the very air itself seemed to tear open, rapidly forming a doorway through which stepped the Arbiter. Then Sam came through, carrying her uncle's body, and following him a tall, thin man dressed in a dark suit and cape. He was just how she imagined a Sorcerer to look, even down to the top hat and white gloves. He turned slowly, staring at the assembled crowd, but when he looked in her direction she could see his face was obscured by a thin scarf that looked more like mist than fabric. His eyes were nothing more than two bright white dots shining through it, making her shudder as his gaze fell across her and lingered a moment. He held a black cane with inscriptions twisting around it, its striking silver top clasped by his gloved hand and glowing slightly.

More screams when the Way closed and the light from the chandeliers flickered as the sprites inside panicked. The Censor pushed her way through

the crowd, desperate to reach her brother as Sam gently laid him on the floor.

“Is he alive?” she asked, and a hush descended as everyone listened for the answer.

“Yes,” Sam said. “But he’s not been treated well.”

Cathy glanced at the Gallica-Rosas. Horatio looked like he was about to pass out, while his mother and father were doing their best to look as shocked as anyone else.

The Sorcerer completed his sweep of the room, leaving cowering guests in the wake of his alien stare. Then he turned to face the Gallica-Rosas and pointed the silver tip of his cane towards them.

“I, Sorcerer Guardian of the Kingdom of Wessex, condemn you, bearers of the Gallica-Rosa blood, for the kidnapping of Richard Angustifolia Lavandula, Master of Ceremonies of Aquae Sulis, within the boundary and jurisdiction of the Kingdom of Wessex, for the theft of his property, for the fraudulent declaration of ownership of his property and for seeking citizenship of Aquae Sulis under false pretences.”

Every head in the room turned to watch the Gallica-Rosas react to the judgement. Horatio’s eyes shut and he swayed slightly as his father clutched his weeping wife tightly.

“Know this!” the Sorcerer boomed, turning slowly, pointing the cane at the stunned crowd as he did so. “This crime originated with Lady Rose herself.”

The crowd’s collective gasp was almost comic. Cathy watched William shoot a look at Amelia as she closed her eyes, as pale as Horatio. Her brother pushed past the people next to her to wrap his arms around her, as if he could protect her from the repercussions of the Sorcerer’s words.

The Sorcerer struck the wooden floor with his cane, sending splinters of wood into the air and starting a crack that snaked across the floor and then darted upwards, another tear in the air appearing, this time several feet away from him.

The crowd surged away from that side of the room, crushing people against walls, and Cathy almost lost her footing as the press of people forced her and Tom and Lucy back.

She could see sunshine through the rent in the air. The scent of roses filled the ballroom as the tear widened and revealed a part of Exilium familiar to her. She recognised the wooden table, though there was less food than when she and Sam had stumbled upon it. The statues were now dancing, their faces wearing masks of false frozen happiness as they twirled and spun. All were either oblivious of, or incapable of reacting to, the slow turn of the Fae lords and ladies towards the Way into the Nether house and the Sorcerer's glare. Cathy saw Lord Poppy and one she assumed was Lord Iris standing next to him, his long hair as white as Poppy's was black, both calm whilst the other lords and ladies shrieked in horror at the sight of the Sorcerer.

"Rose!" he roared, pointing the cane at her now. "Your crimes have been uncovered, your puppets identified as kidnappers and common thieves."

"What is this?" Lady Rose gasped as the other Fae lords and ladies drew back, reacting to her as if she were emitting an awful smell. The faerie Cathy had hit with the platter dived behind Lady Rose's back with a squeal. "How dare you accuse me, Sorcerer! What evidence do you have?" She looked just as she had in the painting: auburn-haired, youthful and impossibly beautiful.

“The Master of Ceremonies of Aquae Sulis, an eyewitness to his kidnapping and the very room I stand in, O foul creature of lies and manipulation. And do not think that your brothers will escape punishment; they are just as guilty and will meet with justice too.” Cathy felt the Sorcerer’s booming voice in her stomach, every word accompanied by the chandelier crystals tinkling above him.

Lady Rose saw the Master of Ceremonies lying on the floor, starting to regain consciousness, and lost her desire to protest innocence. “You dare to judge me, Sorcerer?”

“I am simply setting things to rights in the worlds I am bound to protect, Rose. I will leave it to your King and Queen to punish you as they see fit.” Another gasp rushed around the room. “They have been informed of you and your brothers’ actions, and will be with you very soon. Until then,” he nodded to the Arbiter, “this Arbiter will see to it that you stay and face your monarchs.”

“That’s not necessary,” Lady Rose’s voice trembled.

At the Sorcerer’s nod, the Arbiter pulled out a pair of gloves from his coat pocket and, tucking his walking stick under an arm, pulled them on. They looked bulky, like heavy-duty leather gloves used for gardening, but with small copper plates riveted to the palms and inner fingers.

“He doesn’t need to come through.” Lady Rose was shaking her head at the sight of him walking slowly towards the tear, the tap of his walking stick the only sound in the ballroom. She twisted round to address her peers, now in a tight semi-circle a few metres back as the dancers spun on. “Won’t one of you stand with me? Won’t one of you support my efforts to redress the balance in Aquae Sulis?”

They remained silent as the Arbiter stepped through, all of them flinching – except Lord Iris – as he drew closer to Lady Rose. He hooked

the curved handle of the walking stick over his forearm and gripped her at the elbows. She winced as the gloves made contact and the healthy glow faded from her face. The Arbiter gave a brief nod to the Sorcerer, who turned his back on the tear to look at the Censor. The view into Exilium faded and the Way closed rapidly.

“Lady Censor, do you require any assistance in administering justice here in the Nether?”

She was still crouched next to her brother, who was now forming a few croaky words that Cathy couldn’t make out. She stood and smoothed down her dress. “I most certainly do not, Mr Sorcerer. Whilst I thank you most deeply for your assistance in recovering my brother, I can deal with the Rosas myself.”

“Then I will leave you to your business,” he said, giving the assembled one last glare.

It had the desired effect: the vast majority looked either grave or terrified. Sam sought her out amongst the drained faces and mouthed, “You OK?” to her but she didn’t dare respond in front of so many witnesses.

The Sorcerer opened a Way, less dramatically than before, simply scoring a line into the floor with his cane that rippled the air above it, revealing the dark room and single lantern that she’d caught a glimpse of before. Even though the Sorcerer terrified her, she desperately wanted to go through and talk to Sam. Just the chance of a normal conversation with a normal person was more than enough incentive to bear the awful presence of the Sorcerer. Though why he’d blindfolded her before, when he could evidently disguise his face, was a mystery. Then she realised it was all part of frightening her into submission and forcing her to take Sam into Exilium. Bloody Sorcerer, she thought. You’d better help me escape the Nether after all this.

Once Sam and the Sorcerer had left and the Way closed behind them, the room erupted into a furious din of shouting and speculation. The Gallica-Rosas were forced forwards, pushed into the centre of the room mere metres away from the Censor. The Alba-Rosas were also pulled from the crowd. Cathy watched Amelia's distress at being wrenched from William's side with an awful sickness in her stomach. Even if they weren't involved, it was clear that Lady Rose's high social status in Exilium was about to tumble and they would suffer for it.

"What will happen to the Albas?" she asked Tom.

"Well, even though they don't seem to be involved with hurting our uncle, I think this is the end of Lady Rose," Tom whispered back. "If the King and Queen are involved, nothing good is going to come of it, and likely she'll be punished harshly for embarrassing the Court so terribly. So the best outcome for the Albas is to be taken in by the Agency."

"What's the Agency?" Lucy asked.

"They supply indentured servants. They give people who've fallen from grace a means to survive, and a future for their children. I imagine the Albas will end up as servants to one of the Great Families."

"What if they don't want that?" Lucy asked.

"The only other option is slavery in Exilium," Tom replied.

"Or death," Cathy added.

"But no one has ever chosen to die instead of enter the Agency," Tom said. "That would be absurd."

"Would it?" Cathy muttered to herself. It sounded too close to slavery for her liking. She'd rather die than serve these vultures.

"Surely the Agency has problems keeping them in check?" Lucy seemed to have a grim fascination with the institution.

“They have many powerful Charms,” Tom whispered back. “They’re very wealthy, and rather ruthless people run it, my dear. Best you don’t think of them.”

“Do our staff come from this Agency?” she asked, but Tom didn’t seem to hear that question.

Cathy’s mother had wrestled her way through the crowd to tend to her brother and had taken over his care from the Censor, who held up her hands and called for silence. Eventually, she got what she wanted.

“Ladies and gentlemen. As this sorry affair has been exposed so publicly, it seems only right that it be dealt with publicly. Before I pronounce my judgement, the condemned will be given the opportunity to speak, and what they say may affect the severity of their punishment. I’m aware that this may be unorthodox, but there is nothing commonplace about these events, and no precedent, therefore this will be dealt with as *I* see fit. Before the condemned speak, I need to be certain that every nook of this filthy enterprise has been exposed. Are there any amongst you who have information to offer?”

People looked at each other. Their terror at being funnelled into a room and then locked in by a Sorcerer was now replaced by open *Schadenfreude*.

“Actually,” a man called from the crowd, “I have a great deal of information that may well aid you, Lady Censor.” The people around him stood aside, giving the rest of the room a greater view, but Cathy knew his voice too well. It was William Iris, and he was looking particularly pleased with himself.

31

Will enjoyed the attention as he strolled forward to the edge of the parted crowd. He'd found the spectacle quite enjoyable in the main, aside from the unpleasantness for Amelia and Cornelius, but he was confident he could protect them. The distress on Horatio's face was an extraordinarily pleasurable thing to witness; now it was time to get the best out of this that he could, for himself and his family.

"Lady Censor, I've suspected the Gallica-Rosas had a secret agenda in Aquae Sulis since I returned from my Grand Tour; however, without evidence I could not speak of such. My concerns were first piqued by Horatio's sponsorship into the city for the season, and, as I have explained to you privately, this was obtained via unsavoury means that would not be considered gentlemanly nor decent in any way."

"This is slander!" Horatio shouted but the Censor held up a hand in his direction.

"No more interruptions, Gallica, or I will have you removed." She turned back to Will. "You have explained that to me most eloquently, Mr Iris, and I would like all present to know that I consider the Mascula-Peonia family to be victims of the Gallicas' manipulations as much as I have been, and as such free of blame."

Oliver smiled at Will gratefully, an arm around his sister Cecilia, who looked like she was building up to a dramatic swoon. Nearby, Oliver's mother dabbed at her eyes as Mr Mascula-Peonia closed his with relief.

Will smiled back at his friend. The first objective had been achieved. “May I continue, Lady Censor?” At her nod, he straightened his waistcoat, giving everyone a chance to focus their attention back onto him. “As you’ve no doubt heard, Horatio Gallica-Rosa made some appalling accusations against my fiancée this evening. It may interest you to know, Lady Censor, that soon after the start of the season he threatened me with these accusations, urging me to break my engagement and making it clear that if I chose to ignore him, he would make them public.” He paused as whispers rippled around the room. “When I heard his family had most conveniently awarded him ownership of a mysterious new property in Aquae Sulis, enabling him to press for citizenship, his motives became clear. It is my belief, Lady Censor, that Horatio has been planning to destroy my engagement to the innocent Catherine Papaver with the aim of causing a terrible rift between our families. Doing so would allow them to exploit the resulting instability in the Council of Aquae Sulis and thereby get voted in much more easily. In light of this, I’m sure the good people of Aquae Sulis can see why he would be so motivated to besmirch my fiancée’s good name, and they will therefore treat his accusations with the contempt they deserve.”

He glanced across at Catherine, expecting at least a smile or nod in acknowledgement. Instead she was looking at her father, trying to determine how he was reacting, and most probably how bad things would be once this evening was over. The sooner he extricated her from that household, Will thought, the better.

The Censor waited for the flurry of private commentary to pass. “I understand you and Horatio are to duel over this matter?” she said and he nodded. “Is there anything else?”

“I only wish to apologise for the distress caused this evening by the arrival of the Sorcerer. When someone, who I believe should remain anonymous, confirmed that this house in fact belongs to the Master of Ceremonies, I set things in motion to have him rescued by the Arbiter as swiftly as possible. I had no idea a Sorcerer would come in person and cause such a disturbance. All I can say in my defence, Lady Censor, is that I warned you as best as I could at the time, and to beg your forgiveness for being ignorant of his plans.”

The Censor smiled as if enjoying the social dance. “You are of course forgiven. More than that, Mr Iris, you are held in the highest regard for acting so swiftly. In fact, I think everyone in this city should demonstrate their gratitude to Mr Iris for his bravery, quick thinking and excellent handling of the situation, for without him we might have lost the Master of Ceremonies and forever had the lowest of criminals in our midst.”

She started to clap and in seconds the ballroom resounded with applause. He bowed and then straightened to see Horatio, who appeared to be on the brink of self-combustion. Apart from the Gallica-Rosas, the only other person in the room who seemed eminently unimpressed with him was his fiancée. Surely she hadn’t expected her part in the affair to be brought into the open? Perhaps she thought the applause should have been for her. What an odd creature she was.

Once it had subsided he bowed to the Censor again and took a step back. He’d saved the Peonias from being taken down with the Gallicas and he hoped he’d cast enough doubt on the accusations against Catherine for it all to blow over. He knew the Gallicas were doomed, but was less certain about how Amelia and Cornelius would fare in the wake of Lady Rose’s certain punishment. Surely their family had allies in Londinium who would accept the majority of their wealth in return for keeping them safe in a

Nether house in the country and out of the clutches of the Agency? They'd never enjoy the status they had now, and they'd never be invited to Society events, but it was unthinkable that such a wealthy and powerful family should collapse and be given over to the Agency wholesale. He'd heard of all kinds of deals done to avoid such a fate, but then again he'd never known one of the patrons themselves to be so horrifically disgraced. One thing was for certain: if the Albas had been involved, there would be no way to save them from the Censor's wrath and they would be collected by the Agency by the end of the evening.

"And what say you, Horatio Gallica-Rosa?" the Censor asked.

Horatio took a moment to compose himself. "I find it most interesting, Lady Censor, that William Iris always suspected me, without realising he was being played for a fool by the Albas. For they have been just as involved in this as the rest of my family, and are just as culpable."

"Horatio!" Cornelius said sharply as Amelia leant against him, clutching her brother's arm.

"What?" Horatio sneered. "You thought I'd let you stand there whilst I and my family were destroyed for playing our part in the same game as you? Just because you and your sister were lucky enough to be chosen to play the charmers and I was cast as the villain, it doesn't mean my family should be the only ones to suffer for it. And let's face it, we're all damned now. This is over. Why not lay it all out for them all to see? I'd like him to know the truth." He sneered at Will.

"Explain yourself," the Censor commanded.

Will hid the fact that Horatio's words were sending him into freefall. If this were true, Amelia and Cornelius would face the same fate as the Gallicas, regardless of whether the rest of their family could be saved somehow.

“Our families are not feuding and we planned the entirety of this season’s events together in Londinium. There’s no point in denying what the Lords Thorn did to the Master of Ceremonies, and how I was set to benefit, but it may interest you to know that the Albas were sent here to sabotage the engagement too, but in a more subtle and pleasant way.”

“Will, it’s not true!” Amelia gasped at him, but he kept his expression as impassive as he could. He didn’t want anyone to see the effect she had on him.

“I was set up to be the one everyone hated, the hot-headed swordsman to be kept out of Aquae Sulis at all costs, while we played Cornelius and Amelia as the more palatable alternatives. I knew I’d never live here, and frankly I never wanted to. William Iris thought he was so clever, doing all he could to have the Albas accepted in Society, when he was playing into our hands all along.” He laughed. “Not applauding him now, are you?”

Will knew Amelia was weeping, so he didn’t look at her. It was time to make a decision. He believed Horatio; it made perfect sense. He’d watched the way Cornelius had been looking at him throughout the awful speech, and it was clear he was terrified and guilty. But, even knowing that he’d been played like a fiddle, Will couldn’t bear the thought of them being turned over to the Agency. Not Amelia. Not a jewel like her. She wouldn’t be put to work as a house servant, she’d be sent to a high-class brothel abroad, like the one he and Oliver had stumbled into by accident early in their tour. Her creamy skin and green eyes would make her profitable to the lowest forms of humanity and he simply couldn’t bear the thought of it. He wouldn’t be able to live with himself if he’d had the opportunity to save her and had never taken it.

“Lady Censor,” he said, stepping forward, “Amelia and Cornelius confessed their remit to me earlier this evening.”

“That’s a lie!” Horatio roared.

“And,” Will shouted above his objections, “they begged me to keep it secret so they wouldn’t be punished by their family for their indiscretion until it was certain how this was to play out. I give you my word, Lady Censor, that their allegiance aligned to Aquae Sulis once they discovered how low the Gallicas had stooped in order to achieve Lady Rose’s goals. Horatio is a bitter, cruel man who can’t stand the thought that his bloodline gambled and lost. I see no reason for two innocent people to be dragged down with him.”

The crowd’s speculation was starting to drown out Horatio’s curses. Will permitted himself to look at Amelia, who was gazing at him wide-eyed as she clung to Cornelius. He wondered why Horatio’s parents hadn’t spoken up, then realised they must be terrified of angering the Censor further. They knew they were lost. Their son was too young to accept it quietly.

“Ladies, gentlemen!” The Censor called the room back to silence. She levelled her gaze at Will, studying him. “Are you willing to vouch for these people, even though, as we speak, their patron is receiving judgement from the King and Queen of Exilium?”

Will felt his father’s glare as he nodded. “Yes, Lady Censor.”

Before the Censor could reply the crowd was showered in splinters of crystal as the chandeliers shattered above them. The sprites, now free, fluttered in circles for a moment as women screamed and people were swept into a crush for the doors. The light in the room became diffuse now it was no longer focused and reflected, and sprites battered the windows in desperate attempts to flee before being trapped once more.

Will brushed tiny slivers of crystal from his hair, feeling a splinter spike his thumb. As one of the sprites zipped over the Gallicas’ heads, he saw Mrs

Gallica’s hair tumble out of its arrangement and the jewellery about her neck tarnish and crumble to dust. He cast an eye about the room, seeing plaster powdering into mist up in the corners where sprites were clustering, the previously hidden stylised sprigs of lavender revealed in the cornices once more.

When the initial panic was over, the crowd calmed once they realised that all the active Rosa Charms had failed and they were not in fact being attacked by a wrathful Sorcerer. “The Rose is dead!” someone called out. Will could hear Amelia sobbing into Cornelius’s chest. He looked over to see her brother staring at him, absolutely petrified. Horatio’s mother fainted with no one to catch her, as her husband was swaying himself.

“Silence!” the Censor called out. “It’s clear that Lady Rose has fallen. The collectors from the Agency will be here very soon.”

Catherine’s father, who’d gone to his wife’s side when the chandeliers failed, picked up the Master of Ceremonies and carried him out of the room at the Censor’s nod. Will could see some were tempted to leave, but everyone stayed to see the horror play out. People moved away from the Gallicas; one man even stepped over Horatio’s mother before her husband realised what had happened and tended to her. Horatio was clutching the sides of his head, shaking, muttering to himself.

Everyone knew what was coming. “The Gallicas are condemned for their crime and I forbid anyone within the boundary of the city, be they resident or guest, to take them into their care,” the Censor commanded.

“We were only doing what we were told,” Horatio croaked. “We were only obeying our Patroon. How can this be happening?”

“Mr William Iris is held in high regard and has vouched for the Albas. I will give them the benefit of the doubt,” the Censor said after looking at him again. He suspected she’d been weighing up whether to let him have

what he wanted since he spoke out for them. “Is there anyone in this room prepared to take them in?”

It seemed that no one even considered it. They all looked away as Amelia and Cornelius turned slowly, seeing nothing but the backs of people’s heads. Will noticed Catherine bite her lip and stare at them but she was physically turned around by her brother. Will’s parents, after a pointed stare at him, also turned their backs, as did the Censor herself.

Will looked into Amelia’s eyes. They were reddened but still exquisite, and even though the tip of her nose was pink and her cheeks blotchy she was still breathtaking. He remembered the dull eyes of the whore in the Egyptian brothel, nothing left of whoever she had been, the Madame proudly introducing her as a maiden from one of the great European families who were disgraced by a scandal in the French Court. “Young and fresh,” she kept saying as those eyes just stared past his shoulder. “Young and fresh.”

“I’ll take them in,” he said, striding over and putting a hand on Cornelius’s shoulder as Amelia snatched his other hand and kissed his palm fiercely.

“We are in your debt,” Cornelius whispered, as the sound of carriages arriving set off murmurs about the arrival of the Agency’s collection wagons.

“We’ll address that another time,” Will replied softly, and whilst everyone else was turned away and Horatio was crumpling into a howling mess he stroked Amelia’s cheek, just once. “Don’t worry. I won’t let a soul harm you.”

32

Cathy woke early and lay in bed, staring up at the ceiling and thinking about the Rosas. Like everyone else, she'd watched as the collectors had marched in and dragged the Gallicas out. Horatio tried to fight but they Dolled him before he could even draw his sword and was carried out, stiff as a lamp-post on their shoulders. She could still hear his mother's wailing and didn't think she would ever forget that sound.

The Censor sent everyone home soon after and she'd stayed silent in the carriage as her parents discussed the events. Her uncle looked as if he'd been tortured, her father had said. She wondered how he would know.

Elizabeth delighted in the fact that William had saved the Albas and speculated that his feelings for Amelia in particular must have motivated his chivalry. Cathy did her best to ignore her sister. She didn't care whether Amelia was set up in a distant country house to be his mistress. William could do what he liked. After the success he'd so readily claimed the credit for, the Sorcerer would have to make good on his word and she would find a way to earn a boon from him to cash in as an escape from the Nether. She planned to be away and protected from anything remotely Fae long before their wedding. Whilst she had no idea how she was going to do it, at least there was hope again. Not even Lord Poppy could work around sorcerous magic.

The gentle knock at the door and the key turning in the lock made her sit up in bed. The maid came in with fresh water for the washbowl, locking

the door behind her. “Time to dress, I’m afraid, miss. Sorry it’s so early, but the dressmaker is here to do a fitting.”

“Now?”

“The mistress said I was to ready you right away. I’m sorry. I brought warm water.”

“Clare, how did you come to be in the Agency?”

“I was born into it, miss,” she replied as she pulled Cathy’s nightgown over her head.

“Do you ever want to…leave?”

“Leave, miss? Where would I go?”

“Into Mundanus.”

“You say the strangest things, miss. Why would I ever want to live there?”

“Never mind.” Cathy allowed her to work uninterrupted.

She was escorted to her mother’s dressing room, dressed in her undergarments and a long dressing gown, just like all the other fittings she’d had. Her mother was waiting, and the dressmaker was unwrapping the dress on the other side of the room. She slipped off the robe and waited until she was asked to raise her hands for the dress to be dropped over her.

It wasn’t until it was being settled about her waist that she realised it was white.

“This isn’t my wedding dress, is it?” she asked, feeling an awful bubble of nausea rise up from her gullet.

The dressmaker laughed and glanced at Cathy’s mother whose stern face sobered her. “Yes, miss,” she said.

Cathy resorted to deep breaths to keep the contents of her stomach, which thankfully were only a glass of water. She watched the dressmaker pin the hem and edges of the sleeves. It was beautiful, although too full in

the skirt for her liking, reminding her of a princess in one of the books she'd been given as a child. The bodice was delicately beaded and it was very flattering, but it didn't change the fact it was for her wedding.

She stayed silent, sensing a tension from her mother that made it more likely that anything she said would be wrong. The dressmaker worked fast and soon it was being unlaced and lifted off again.

"I'll be sure to have it ready on time, Ma'am," she said and bobbed a swift curtsy to her mother before hastily wrapping the dress.

Cathy put her dressing gown back on and her mother escorted her to the bedroom where a breakfast tray had been left. "Isn't it too soon to do the final fitting?" she asked.

"Sit down, Catherine," Mother said, pouring her a cup of tea. "And drink this, you're rather pale."

Cathy gulped down the tea to relieve her parched mouth. "What if I lose more weight before the wedding?"

"That won't be a problem, Catherine. The wedding is tomorrow."

"What!" Cathy dumped the cup and was on her feet in a moment.

"William Iris pressed for it to be sooner and, after what was said about you at the ball, we all felt it better to marry you quickly before the Rosa storm is old news. Then when people remember what was said about you, you'll be safely married and it will blow over."

"But…tomorrow?" Cathy's chest felt like it was being crushed. "You can't mean that!"

"I can and I do. Which you had better practise saying, Catherine, and you'll have plenty of time to prepare. You're not leaving this room until the carriage arrives tomorrow morning to collect you."

Cathy's ears started to ring, her toes and fingers became numb and her mother grasped her arms to ease her back down onto the bed. "You didn't

put something in the…”

“Tea?” her mother completed the sentence for her. “Just a little something to keep you relaxed. I suggest you use your last day as a single woman and the bane of our lives wisely, and think about how you will best please your husband.”

His duties discharged regarding Lady Rose, and the all-clear given by Ekstrand, Max and the gargoyle stood in the Nether, outside the cloister. The fortified exterior looked the same as it had through the scrying glass. Max looked at the gargoyle. “Are you sure you want to come inside?”

“I need to see it.”

“But you know what’s in there, you must do.”

“I know they’re all dead, I know some of the injuries, I know about the thorns. But…that’s up here.” It tapped its forehead with a stone claw. “It’s…detached. I need to experience it.”

Max shrugged. “All right. Whatever you think you need.”

“It’s what *we* need.”

Max didn’t reply, but instead set off with the walking stick on the approach to the doors.

The two bodies were still in the entrance; in the Nether their bodies wouldn’t decay as they would in Mundanus. Once he was finished with the investigation they would have the task of clearing and disposing of the corpses. He decided the gargoyle shouldn’t be involved in that. It would only get more upset.

“That’s Jackson,” said the gargoyle, pointing at the closest body. It’d stopped in the doorway, its frown so intense Max could barely see the stone eyes beneath the brow.

Max went closer to the body, taking care not to step in the pooled blood. He could see a set of red dots leading out of it from where the artefact's legs had been coated and left tracks. He lifted the clothing, saw the knife wound. "Looks like he was stabbed in the back," he said and peered over him to the other body, the knife still in the dead man's hand.

"If Lewis killed Jackson," said the gargoyle, taking a couple of steps closer to the bodies, "who killed Lewis?"

Max went to the second body, saw that his throat had been slit. "Whoever it was must have killed him after Jackson was stabbed, then went back into the cloister. Come on."

There was a pause but the gargoyle eventually came through the arch and into the cloister. It looked at the bodies and the blood. The rasping came from deep in its throat again, the same sound it made when Ekstrand first told it about the deaths.

"How could anyone do this?" it asked. "They weren't even Arbiters, they were just researchers…just staff."

"We need to find the Arbiters," Max said, making his way carefully, taking in as many details as he could as he progressed further along the passageway. "There are two unaccounted for."

Pieces of paper, pencils and smashed glass littered the floor. The staff seemed to have literally dropped what they were doing and started to kill each other. Most appeared to be victims of strangulation or creative uses of whatever had been near to hand. One body had a pencil sticking out of an eye. There were more knife wounds than visible weapons could account for, so Max kept an eye out for any members of kitchen staff with knives who'd probably rampaged through the cloister more effectively than those unarmed.

Here and there the stems of roses could be seen, but no blooms, only thorns. Most were growing out of mouths, some reaching across to others and piercing their skin, without any discernible pattern. Keeping the quad on his left, Max went to the door of the tower in the right hand corner, the one that contained his room. He didn't have any personal effects to retrieve; he'd lost any sentimentality when his soul was dislocated. He just wanted to see if it had been searched and whether the other Arbiters had been killed in their rooms or elsewhere in the cloister.

The stone steps of the tower were free of bodies. Max climbed slowly, relying heavily on the walking stick and hand rope as the gargoyle whimpered behind him. His room was the first off the stairwell and it appeared undisturbed. He climbed to the room above. It was empty. He expected the room at the top to be empty too; even if an Arbiter had been asleep the noise of everyone suddenly going mad would have been enough to wake him. The bodies were probably elsewhere.

He'd been wrong. The Arbiter, a man called Winston, was in his bed and the sheets were soaked in his blood. There were punctures in the cotton above his stomach – Max counted four stabs – and the knife was missing.

"Bloody hell," the gargoyle muttered.

"Almost literally," Max replied.

"That's not funny." The gargoyle left the room and clunked down the stairs.

"I wasn't trying to be funny." Max followed it down. "We need to keep looking for the other Arbiters. You can wait outside if you want."

"You think if I wait outside it will make this any easier?" The gargoyle rounded on him at the bottom of the steps. "I'm not being overly emotional – *we're* upset by this, you just don't feel it."

“That’s the point.” Max moved forwards to descend the last step, but the gargoyle wouldn’t budge. He put a hand on its shoulder to try and push it out of the way and felt a surge of discomfort rise up from his stomach into his chest. He moved back and broke contact. “I don’t understand what you want.”

The gargoyle looked like it was about to say something but didn’t manage to put it into words. It stepped aside.

Max searched room after room throughout the building, the gargoyle following silently. Everyone was dead, either strangled or stabbed. When they came across Max’s former mentor slumped against a wall in a pool of his own blood the gargoyle rushed out into the centre of the quad and wailed up at the silver sky. Max watched it through the open doorway, deciding to wait for the worst to be over before moving on.

The gargoyle regained its composure and made its way back. Max met it at one of the openings onto the quad. “There’s something not right about this,” it said.

“What do you mean?”

“Something…I don’t know. Something isn’t right.”

Max scanned the bodies. He knew the gargoyle meant more than just being surrounded by all the death. “I know what you mean. Let’s find where they kept the soul vessels. The Chapter Master is probably there.”

“He’ll be dead,” the gargoyle replied.

Max nodded and went to the doorway that led to the second quad. He hadn’t been in there for years; everything he needed, such as the briefing room and dining room, was in the quad they’d already searched.

The other Arbiter was the first they found, lying face-down on the other side of the door. Max stepped over him and looked through each room in turn, not knowing where the soul vessels were kept. Eventually he came to

a doorway leading down into a cellar space. There was a heavily fortified door that was open, a body lying across the threshold and the now familiar sticky blood around it. All but two of the oil lanterns had run dry but there was still enough light to see a desk and chair, the body slumped in it, and another member of staff lying nearby. The Chapter Master was near the door, his neck broken.

The far wall was dominated by a thick shelf the width of the room, upon which sat several large clay jars, all smashed. On the larger pieces Max could still make out sorcerous runes and noted the thick chunks of wax seal clinging to chunks of broken rims.

“These must be the soul vessels,” he said, and the gargoyle went inside to look.

“A jar? I lived in a bloody jar all that time?”

“Not like you are now,” Max said. “You never complained before, when I made a connection.”

“No…I suppose not. It just seems…demeaning.” It sniffed around the chunks of earthenware as Max went to the desk, intrigued by a length of chain left dangling from a corner. The man slumped in the chair had a pen in his lap, and the ink had soaked into his trousers.

“He must have taken notes,” Max said. “The Roses must have taken the book he was writing in. Makes sense, I suppose.”

“Something’s not right,” the gargoyle said.

“How did they get the messages I sent?” Max asked, looking at the broken jars.

“I don’t know,” the gargoyle replied. “Something to do with him, probably, why else would he be in here?” It pointed a claw at the one lying on the floor near where the jars were. “I don’t like it down here. Let’s go.”

They went back up the stairs, looked through the last rooms and found more of the same. The gargoyle wandered off, muttering to itself. Max shared its sense of missing something. He thought back to when he saw the first body on the scrying glass. The sense of something being wrong began as early as then. “Let’s go back to near the entrance,” he said.

He found the woman with the thorn through her lower lip. She was called Carrie and she was one of the best liaison officers there. He remembered her thorough briefings before going into the field. It looked like she too had been strangled. He struggled to bend over to look at the marks on her neck more carefully.

The skin was only slightly discoloured. Now he was seeing it with his own eyes and not enlarged on a huge scrying glass he appreciated how light the bruising was. He inspected her fingernails, hands and wrists, then went back to the abrasion on her throat. The skin was damaged, like something rough had been pressed against it.

“She wasn’t strangled,” he said. “She would have struggled but there’s no sign of it, and not enough bruising either.”

“Maybe the bloody great big stalk growing out of her mouth had something to do with her death,” the gargoyle said. “Maybe the marks are from her own hands as she was choking.”

“Maybe…” Max muttered. He straightened up, saw the gargoyle heading back to the entrance and followed it.

It was staring at Lewis, at the cut across his throat, Jackson’s body and the knife in Lewis’s hand. “Something’s not–”

“Lewis was left-handed,” Max said and pointed at the knife held in the wrong hand. “And if he killed Jackson and then someone else slit Lewis’s throat, there would be more blood, in an arc across Jackson’s body. In fact, there should be more blood altogether.”

He went back into the cloister, walked between the bodies. “I don’t think any of these people killed each other, I think someone wants us to think they did. These wounds haven’t bled as much as they should because they were made after the person had died. And there are no other injuries, no other signs of struggle on most of the people supposedly strangled. This has all been staged.”

“Then how did they all die?”

“Quickly,” Max said. “And all at the same time, otherwise someone would have raised the alarm. That’s why Winston was in bed, because he didn’t have a chance to get up.”

“That doesn’t sound like Fae magic to me,” the gargoyle said. “And I can’t see Lady Rose or the Thorns taking the time to do this.”

“No,” Max replied. “We need to tell Ekstrand. Even though there was Rose magic here, it wasn’t a Fae who killed these people. We were meant to think that. There’s no way an innocent could have found this place, and the Camden Chapter wouldn’t have been able to kill everyone instantly…which means only one thing.”

“It must be a Sorcerer,” the gargoyle said. “And I bet it’s that one in charge of London.”

Acknowledgments

Every book has its own story. This book was brought to you by a serious of such unlikely events and good luck that it would better fit within the pages of the novel rather than this little bit at the end. The only difference is that these are true. And there were no fairies involved, thank goodness.

Firstly, there's the person this book is dedicated to. You know who you are, you know I could never have thrown everything into this book and those that come after it without your generosity, sense of adventure and just plain craziness. Thank you.

Next is Paul Cornell who told me to tell Lee Harris about the insane thing the person above enabled me to do. If you hadn't given me that advice Paul, I wouldn't be writing this now. Thank you.

Thanks, in turn, to Lee Harris who looked at me like I was crazy, discovered I actually was but still liked my book enough to give me a contract. Thank you for believing in the Split Worlds and for all your support and encouragement, even beyond your tenure as my editor.

Thanks to Adam Christopher for listening to me freak out about one of the most difficult decisions I've had to make in my writing career to date and being so totally calm, truthful and sage at me over coffee. And for introducing me to DMLA and ultimately leading me to…

Jennifer Udden. Thank you for listening to me hyperventilate and try to explain a really big imaginary world when I was still very much in it. You've made me a better writer and you totally understand all my creative craziness. Thank you.

Thanks to my beta readers Conall, Tracy, Heike, Kate, Mum (hello Mum!) and my grandmother. Your feedback made the book better, I hope you like what it turned into!

Lastly, and by no means least, a great big fat thank you to my husband, Peter. You listened to the first drafts and told me the truth, you reassured me when the Fear got loud and helped me untangle plot and brain knots. But above everything else you have believed in me, even when I haven't believed in myself. Thank you, my love.

Any Other Name

The Split Worlds: Book Two

Emma Newman

For the Alchemist

1

Sam knew it was a terrible idea, but once he realised he had to go back to Exilium his course was set. It was like the time he and Dave decided to see who could drink the most tequila without throwing up or passing out. As they matched each other shot for shot he knew it was stupid—perhaps even dangerous—but once they'd had the idea it was impossible to ignore. It was like a cannon already fired; something was bound to be broken, it was just a matter of what.

As he walked out of King's Cross station and looked down the Euston Road, Sam doubted his plan. It wasn't much of one anyway: go to the last place the blonde girl had been seen and look for something…weird. The television appeal from her family was still raw in his thoughts. If he hadn't been watching the news over breakfast he'd be at work now, perhaps even successfully putting the events of the last few weeks behind him and doing what the Sorcerer had ordered: not telling a living soul about his entanglement with the Fae, and getting back to his mundane life.

But he had seen it and recognised the blonde as one of the enslaved dancers in Exilium. Cathy had said there was nothing he could do but everything had changed since then. The Rose had been broken, that's what they said. Those people might be free, but trapped on the wrong side of the Nether.

He'd tried to call Cathy but the phone went straight to voicemail. She was probably in the Nether and he had no idea how to get there without the Sorcerer's help. He couldn't go to the police. What would he say? "Good

morning, officer. Those missing blondes—the ones you didn't seem to notice were being kidnapped—are being held in a beautiful magical prison created for the Fae." Sam knew they'd either laugh at him or have him sectioned. Neither would help those people.

Sam wasn't entirely sure he was still sane. At least Leanne had left without being tangled up in it all. She'd already moved to London and he'd promised to join her as soon as he could arrange some time off work. He would never be able to tell her anything about what had happened to him and he wasn't sure their marriage could survive the strain.

Ultimately he would have to hand in his notice—if he wasn't sacked first—and move to London. He'd never really wanted to live in the Big Smoke, but since the trip to Exilium he'd lost all motivation for his job. Perhaps a change would be good for the marriage too.

Perhaps he needed therapy.

He walked past the British Library with the slow pace of a lost tourist. He looked up at the higher floors of the huge buildings and down into the drains and gutter. What did he expect to find? A lock of blonde hair? A rose petal? A convenient note detailing instructions for the kidnappers?

"You twat," he whispered to himself. "What the arse are you going to do anyway?"

He headed back towards the station, thinking it might be best to abandon his childish attempt at heroics and go and visit Leanne at the apartment. He hadn't even seen it and he was supposed to be moving in soon.

Waiting at a set of traffic lights, he looked up at the huge hotel on the other side and then down the road he was about to cross. Surely they wouldn't take a girl anywhere near such a busy road? Perhaps they'd led

her into a side street like the one he was looking down, away from the crowds and CCTV.

He crossed and turned left, keeping the hotel and station on his right. He'd never appreciated how far back King's Cross stretched. He passed dozens of waiting taxis and decided to do a circuit of the area immediately around the station. Further down Midland Road he was about to turn back when he saw greenery incongruous with the urban concrete around him. Remembering the intense green of Exilium's meadows he pressed on, finding a church set back from the road behind ornate iron gates.

The churchyard had been turned into a small park and Sam found its natural peace irresistible. He went through the gates and immediately felt better, as if the place had dropped a blanket around his shoulders to protect him against the quiet violence of the city. He strolled to an elaborate tomb, past an ornate blue drinking fountain and up to the church. He didn't go inside when he heard music coming from within, not wanting to interrupt anything, so he walked around the back and came across an oak tree with dozens of gravestones stacked at its base.

He stared at the way the roots had grown between the slabs until the stones and the tree looked like they'd always been one. There was probably a metaphor for life and death in there somewhere.

"Hello!"

He jumped and looked for the source of the high-pitched voice. It sounded like a—

"Down here!"

He crouched and peered into the dark crevice between two gravestones. A tiny face moved out of the shadow for a moment and then an equally tiny hand waved at him. It was the faerie from Exilium, the one who'd led him and Cathy to Lord Poppy.

“Bloody hell! What are you doing here?” he whispered. “I thought you guys were trapped in Exilium.”

“We can come through in the oldest places, if we’re very careful. How clever of you to come here.”

“I had no idea…wait—what do you mean?”

“You want to come back, don’t you? To Exilium?” When he nodded, it clapped its hands. “I’ll take you. Close your eyes.”

He hesitated. The first time he’d met one of them in Mundanus they’d Charmed the fuck out of his brain and practically ruined his life. The second time he met one, Cathy had walloped it with a plate. He was fairly certain this one was actually helpful in Exilium, but not certain enough.

“I promise I’m taking you into Exilium to help you,” it said. “I won’t take you anywhere horrid or turn you inside out.”

Sam remembered the people he had to find. How else was he going to get there? He closed his eyes. There was a brief tickle on his left eyelid, then on the right, and his ears popped.

He was struck by a distinct change in air quality; the grim fumes he’d already become accustomed to in London had been replaced by the sweet scent of flowers.

“We’re here!”

Sam opened his eyes. The blue of the sky made him ache for childhood summers, playing outside in seemingly endless sunshine, and the grass was so verdant it made him doubt he’d ever seen real grass before.

Then he remembered what Cathy told him: people could get lost there forever if they didn’t stay focused. He looked at the faerie. “I don’t suppose you’ve seen any blonde people here lately? They’re from Mundanus.”

The faerie flashed an excited smile. “Oh, yes! Would you like me to take you to them?”

“Yes! Brilliant!” Sam said, following as it set off. Maybe this heroic rescue thing wasn’t going to be so hard after all.

Catherine sat in her nightdress. Her feet were cold; the slippers were still tucked neatly in their usual place just to the left of her bare toes. Leaden, she leaned back towards the welcoming divot her head had made overnight.

“Oh, no, you don’t!” the maid dashed over to pull Cathy onto her feet. “Time to get up now, Miss Papaver! There’s so much to do. The mistress said I need to wash you quick.”

The nightdress was pulled off her and the sponge rubbed up and down her arms. Cathy watched the activity with complete detachment. “So much to do,” the maid had said. That resonated.

“You must be so excited,” the maid gabbled. Cathy wondered if she’d been talking all along and she just hadn’t realised it.

She was about to ask why when the maid had already moved onto another subject. All she wanted to do was lie down and go back to sleep. Once she’d been washed and dried, an unfamiliar silk dressing gown was tied about her waist.

Cathy could feel a flutter of something unpleasant in her stomach. Had something bad happened? Was that why there was so much noise?

She could hear servants clattering up and down the stairs. The house was filled with the sound of orders being given and occasional shrieks from her sister down the hallway. The latter was nothing new.

“Come on, now,” the maid said. She’d opened the door and was looking at her expectantly. Cathy assumed she wanted her to leave, but walking felt like a distant memory of something she once did to pass the time. “You’re to be dressed in your mother’s dressing room today.”

“Why?” Cathy fought to form her lips around the word.

“It’s tradition, isn’t it?” The maid had resorted to pulling her along.

Again, that sense of something terrible, a long way away from where she was now. She felt a dull serenity as she watched maids carrying all manner of things up and down the stairs. One was running out of her sister’s room in tears, a hairbrush flying out after her.

Then she was in her mother’s dressing room. Aside from a huge mirror, the walls were filled with cupboards and wardrobes. A single red chaise-longue was positioned in the centre of the room.

Cathy was left looking at the pink glow lingering on her skin from the maid’s earnest scrubbing. It was like looking at a painting of herself; she felt no connection to her reflection.

A woman bustled in with two assistants and, after a liberal application of talcum powder, Cathy found herself in the midst of efficient dressing. When she was in silk hose and bloomers, chemise and corset, her mother entered, wearing a blood-red dress with large black buttons. Her sister was close behind, hair half pinned up, a nervous maid trailing after her with a basket of hair clips and other accessories.

“You look well rested,” Mother said.

Elizabeth sat on the chaise-longue. She was wearing a dressing gown over her underwear, judging from her tiny waist. “Now for goodness’ sake get it right!” she said to the maid after taking the basket from her. She picked out a hairpin and passed it to the girl, whose hands were trembling. “What are you staring at?” Cathy realised she’d lost track of herself again.

“Now, now, dear,” Mother said, inspecting her own hair in the mirror. “Today is the one day you have to be particularly nice to Catherine.”

“Already? I thought that was once we leave the house.”

“Elizabeth.” Mother gave her a look that ended Elizabeth’s pout.

“Once my hair is pinned I want you to tighten my lacing, Mama, you’re so much better at it. I want to make Imogen look like an elephant next to me. And I need a new lady’s maid, mine is hopeless.”

Imogen. Imogen Reticulata-Iris. William’s sister. Just the thought of him made that distant flutter spike into a brief burst of something bright and sharp.

“I think I…I was going to do something.” Cathy realised she’d spoken aloud when her mother came over.

“You don’t need to do anything except stand there and be dressed.” She looked into Cathy’s eyes as if checking that a long-lost cat was still missing. “Elizabeth, did you eat anything at breakfast?”

“I had a small cup of tea and not a morsel of food. I’d rather faint than be too full for a tight lacing, Mama. Catherine slept too late to join us. I expected you to be up before the rest of us today.”

“Why?” Cathy asked, but Elizabeth was too busy slapping at the maid’s hand for jabbing a pin into her scalp.

“Are you ready for your dress, Miss Papaver?” The woman was familiar, but it took her a few moments to place her as the dressmaker. “Are you feeling all right?”

“She’s fine,” Mother said. “Start dressing her now.”

Cathy was guided, pulled and pushed into a heavy embroidered gown. It was white. She stared at it in the mirror as the tiny buttons were done up the back. Its crystal beads glinted in the sprite light. Through her muddied thoughts, two facts bubbled slowly to the surface: it was a wedding dress, and this was very, very wrong.

“Is she going to faint?” the dressmaker said as Cathy swayed.

“No.” Mother took hold of Cathy’s arm and clasped her hand tight.

“I had to do something,” Cathy said, trying to shake off the wooliness. “I had to—”

“Hush now, dear.” Mother patted her hand. “You’re just a little lightheaded, that’s all, it’s perfectly natural.”

Elizabeth came over and looked into her eyes. “Oh, Mother, look at her. She can’t get married like that. Did you give her poppy milk?”

“Just so she would have a good night’s sleep.” Mother’s smile was more smug than compassionate. “We’ll make sure she’s bright and wide awake when she needs to be. Now let me see to your lacing whilst they pin Catherine’s hair. The carriage will be here soon.”

As Cathy was steered to the seat, she remembered she’d intended to tear the bed sheet into strips and escape from the window of her bedroom. She wasn’t supposed to be getting married, she finally realised, but the thought was as slippery as a melting icicle. Her eyelids drooped and she found it hard to keep her head up. Nap first, escape later, she thought. There would be time. There was always time for sleep.

Max watched Axon stitch the incision closed as Petra peeled off the latex gloves covered in the dead Arbiter’s blood. In the silence of the cloister the only sounds had been those of the autopsy. Both Petra and Axon were clearly shaken by what they’d seen but Max’s emotions were safely locked away in the gargoyle back at the Sorcerer’s house.

The Sorcerer came to the doorway holding a handkerchief over his nose and mouth. “All done?”

“Yes, Mr Ekstrand, all done,” Petra replied, taking off the apron and washing her hands in a nearby basin of water. “Once Axon has finished, I suggest we repair to the house.”

“Good idea,” Ekstrand replied. “What are your initial impressions?”

Max could see Petra’s hands trembling with fatigue. She’d been working solidly for two long days. Axon had noticed it too. “Perhaps that would be better discussed over a cup of tea, sir,” he suggested, tying off the thick black thread.

“I’ll open a Way,” Ekstrand said. “Thank you for your hard work. An admirable activity for a Thursday, wouldn’t you agree?”

“Indeed, sir.” Axon pulled off his gloves. “I’ll see to everything back here once refreshments have been served.” That earned a grateful smile from Petra.

They left the cool sterility of the healing room at the cloister and walked straight through into Ekstrand’s hallway. Petra excused herself, Axon promised tea and Ekstrand paced impatiently as Max hobbled to the sofa in the living room.

The gargoyle was upstairs and Max knew it was hiding from the gruesome task of discovering what had killed everyone in the Bath Chapter. Max assumed it was feeling unsettled, as his own emotional reaction to the autopsy was bound into the stone through the soul chain round the gargoyle’s neck.

Ekstrand poked at the fire. “How’s the leg?”

“Healing well, thank you, sir,” Max said.

“Splendid, splendid. I spoke with the Master of Ceremonies this morning, whilst you were at the cloister. He’s much better than when you first found him. He couldn’t speak for long. His niece is getting married today.”

“The puppet who helped us?”

“Was that her? I have no idea. Perhaps, although he has more than one niece. He’s very happy to have his house back, even though he won’t be

able to use it in the same way again, of course."

"And what exactly did he use it for?"

"Secret meetings with his lovers. It seems the sister gets jealous. Strange bunch, the Fae-touched."

"Yes, sir." Max tried to flex his foot, as having the broken leg resting on a footstool was giving him pins and needles. A dull ache where the titanium pins and plates had been secured felt like it had set in for the day.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, sir," Petra said as she entered wearing different clothes. "Max, the gargoyle can read!"

"You didn't give it any of my books did you?" Ekstrand was half out of the chair before she had a chance to reply.

"Of course not. I gave it one of mine."

"*Wuthering Heights*," Max said as a sudden image of the title page popped into his mind.

She blinked at him. "You know it's creepy when you do that?"

"It houses his soul, of course he knows," Ekstrand said. "Petra, once we've discussed your findings I want to practise what one should say on hearing that a niece has recently married."

"All right." She had her notebook and pen and sat on the nearest armchair as Axon arrived with the tea. As Ekstrand was distracted by the impending refreshments, she leaned towards Max. "The gargoyle liked the sound of it. It almost went for *The Count of Monte Cristo*."

"It is Lapsang Souchong, isn't it, Axon?" At the butler's nod Ekstrand said, "I'll pour."

He handed a cup of tea to Max. "Lavandula told me that if we hadn't intervened, the Roses would have broken him and returned him corrupted. Before we could say, 'More Battenberg, please' they'd have used him to

wheedle their way onto the Aquae Sulis Council and shut me out. That reminds me, where's the cake?"

"Here, sir," Axon said, bringing in a large plate stand. "Lemon drizzle cake sir, as requested."

"Did I really ask for that? Pop it down and give everyone a slice, there's a good fellow. Now, let's discuss the details from the autopsies."

Petra flipped back a few pages. "The results are…unusual," she said after a few moments, and then took a slice of cake from Axon gratefully. "They all died from the same cause: their hearts were turned to stone."

Ekstrand's cake didn't reach his mouth. "I beg your pardon?"

"The hearts were literally turned to stone. We carried out ten autopsies including the two Arbiters, the Chapter Master and three of the people who had thorns growing out of them, plus four selected at random. Previous to the…incident all were in good health. They were taken from different parts of the cloister, so I think it's a reasonable assumption that everyone died from the same…ailment."

Ekstrand rested the fork and its morsel of cake back on his plate. "Maximilian thinks the mutual murders were staged. Would you agree with that?"

She nodded. "Yes. No one was strangled, and the angles of the knife wounds and the force applied don't match up with the people who were supposed to look like the assailants. I'll compile the details of those observations in my report. I believe they collapsed when their hearts were changed. They would have had a very short period of consciousness, whilst the blood in their brains was oxygenated, but then they would have died in a manner similar to a person having a heart attack. I can't imagine how it must have felt." Her voice wavered and she cleared her throat. "That's speculation, of course."

“This is most disturbing.” Ekstrand picked up the fork again. “Do you think they all died at the same time?”

“As far as I can tell, yes. It’s not possible to work out exactly when. It would explain why no one raised the alarm.”

“What in the Worlds could change their hearts to stone?” Ekstrand wondered aloud.

“It doesn’t sound like Fae magic,” Max said.

“This is unlike anything the Fae would be able to do, even if they wanted to,” Ekstrand replied. “I thought the Rose magic picked up by the Sniffer was a causal factor. Now I’m not sure. Perhaps it just grew the thorns.”

“It seems a seed was forced down their throats after death and then grown, rather than a stem being forced in to choke the individual,” Petra said.

“Hardly justifies the amount of Rose magic detected,” Ekstrand muttered.

“Could a Sorcerer do it?” Max asked the question, seeing it as another tick in the column under “Sorcerer of Essex corrupt”.

“No,” Ekstrand replied without hesitation. “It’s simply impossible.”

“Couldn’t a formula be written on the building and affect everything within it?”

“Maximilian,” Ekstrand said, “your skills, whilst admirable, do not extend to sorcery. Formulae require exact definition of variables and parameters. Each person’s heart would have subtle differences making it impossible to work one formula that could affect every single person’s heart at exactly the same time.”

“Even if it were defined by the common variables?” Petra asked. “Couldn’t all of the hearts be expressed as the organ that pumps blood with

four chambers, four valves—”

Ekstrand shook his head. “Far too vague. This is simply an impossible thing to achieve with either Fae or sorcerous magic. It is truly inexplicable.”

“We’ll carry on investigating,” Petra said. “There must be a critical piece of information we’re missing.”

Ekstrand nodded. “We need to be thorough, that much is true. Every single body needs to be autopsied and tested for any other trace magic. I’d also like to have a go at one myself. It is Thursday after all.”

Petra fidgeted. “I’m not sure this is the best time, Mr Ekstrand. There’s so much to do. I can refer you to an excellent book on pathology.”

“Jolly good.” Ekstrand smiled and finally took a bite of the cake. “Excellent, Axon, excellent. Not too sweet, just enough tang to the lemon.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“The only clear lead we have is the Rose magic,” Ekstrand said. “No one could replicate that residue.”

“Perhaps a Sorcerer could,” Max said. “It all points to the Sorcerer Guardian of Essex. The corruption is in his territory, and when—”

“Remind me about what happened in London,” Ekstrand said, sliding a second slice of cake onto his plate.

“I was shot whilst collecting evidence, sir. They were turning a blind eye to kidnapping an innocent in broad daylight.”

“Ah, that’s how your leg got broken and your soul ended up in the gargoyle, yes, I recall it now. And they knew you had a deep connection open and the Chapter Master could see what you were witnessing, am I right?”

“Yes, sir, which is why I think the Sorcerer of Essex is responsible. To cover it up.”

Ekstrand shook his head. “It makes no sense. Why make it look like the Roses are involved?”

“Maybe they were,” Petra said. “Just not in killing them.”

“We’re definitely missing something,” Max said. “They drop dead when someone or something turns their hearts to stone, someone arranges their bodies to make it look like they killed each other and then works some powerful Rose magic that only results in a few stems? It doesn’t add up.”

For a while, the only sounds were the crackling of the fire and Ekstrand’s chewing.

“Just because the corruption in London is in Dante’s territory, it doesn’t logically follow that he is behind the destruction of our Chapter,” Ekstrand said. “It may be that a third party has found a way to infiltrate the Chapters, thereby corrupting Dante’s and destroying mine. If that’s the case, no one is safe. And all indications are that the Roses are the infiltrators. Even if we don’t know how those hearts were turned to stone, we know there was Rose magic used in the cloister, and that they’re being given free rein in one of London’s wards.”

“They are the common element,” Max agreed.

“I suppose Lady Rose is difficult to speak to at the moment,” Petra said.

“I’ll have to petition the royal family to interrogate her and the Brothers Thorn, but given the circumstances it shouldn’t be too difficult,” Ekstrand replied. “I’ll do that tomorrow. Always better to deal with Fae royalty on a Friday, I find. And the wheels are in motion with regards to the moot with the other sorcerers. When I’m there I’ll be able to gauge if Dante is aware of the corruption in his Chapter or not.”

“Is there any way we can keep an eye on things in London?” Max asked.

“Too risky,” Ekstrand said. “We don’t have the resources to monitor things in any subtle manner, and we can’t risk Dante finding out you’re there, nor the Arbiters who tried to kill you.”

“And what about the Chapter?” Max asked. “Are you going to rebuild it?”

“When I know exactly what happened to the last one,” Ekstrand said, picking crumbs off his plate. “And not a moment before. Terribly tiring, I recall, building a Chapter and training a Master. Definitely not something for Tuesdays or Thursdays. Or Sundays for that matter. Now, Petra, I need to practise what to say to the Master of Ceremonies on his next visit when he mentions the wedding. I was planning on commiserating with him and offering a slice of something. I had thought a nice Victoria sponge, but now I think lemon drizzle cake, and perhaps a handkerchief. Dreadful business, weddings, dreadful. What do you think?”

Petra set down her notebook and picked up her cake plate. “I think we’ll work on it, Mr Ekstrand.”

2

Will sipped his morning tea and thought of Amelia Alba-Rosa instead of the woman he was marrying in less than two hours. Not that Amelia was an Alba-Rosa anymore; now she and her brother would be known as Amelia and Cornelius White. He wondered how well she was recovering from the trauma of the Sorcerer's revelations and the destruction of their place in Society. She and Cornelius would be back in Londinium by now, waiting at the house they'd always lived in. Now their home belonged to him.

"Another cup, Will?" Nathaniel asked as he poured his own tea. His brother was in better spirits than usual, which had surprised Will, seeing as he'd missed the opportunity to duel with Horatio Gallica-Rosa. Then he realised the good mood was for that very reason: Nathaniel was now seen as the best swordsman of his generation and he hadn't even needed to lift a blade to achieve it.

"No, thank you," Will replied.

"I wonder where Horatio is now," Imogen said. The Gallica-Rosas were on the minds and lips of everyone in Aquae Sulis.

We were only obeying our Patroon. How can this be happening? Horatio Gallica's words had transformed him, from a hateful, arrogant man hell-bent on ruining his fiancée's reputation, into a pawn on the losing side. If the Iris Patroon had ordered such behaviour Will knew he would have obeyed, just as Horatio had, and the thought haunted him.

"To think I actually danced with him," Imogen said.

“To think you hoped to marry him,” Nathaniel said, stirring sugar into his tea.

“I did not,” Imogen replied. “I speculated about his potential as a spouse, nothing more.”

“I saw you huff and puff every time Elizabeth Papaver danced with him.”

“Dear brother, there is a world of difference between wanting to keep in the race and backing the wrong horse altogether. Surely you of all people understand that.”

Nathaniel dropped the spoon onto the saucer with a clatter and fired a dark glare at Imogen, promising retribution at a later date. The ignorance of yet another family secret filled Will once more, but by the end of the day he’d be married and moving out of the family house and none of it would matter. The thought both delighted him and killed his appetite. If only he were leaving to set up home with Amelia. He couldn’t imagine having breakfast with Catherine. What would they talk about?

At least his fiancée was more interesting than he’d thought. Catherine had successfully navigated a mundane through Exilium, carried out a secret spying mission for a Sorcerer and smuggled a sorcerous artefact into the most controversial party of the season. She was clearly capable in a crisis, so why was she so inept at the easiest aspects of life in Nether Society?

“Lost your appetite, Will dear?” Imogen was still glowing from having scored a point off Nathaniel. She reached across and patted his hand. “Perfectly understandable. I do hope they dress Catherine in something decent. Surely they could manage that for her wedding day. After all, it’s the only day of that girl’s life that everyone will be looking at her.”

“By the end of the day she’ll be your sister-in-law,” Will reminded her.

Imogen withdrew her hand, her sharp smile fading. “How perfectly awful.”

“Don’t worry, old chap, she’ll be veiled,” Nathaniel chipped in.

“Yes, just pretend there’s someone else under there when you’re in front of the Oak.” Imogen smirked. Will knew perfectly well who she meant.

Neither Nathaniel nor Imogen mentioned the Albas openly, probably some nod towards discretion on his wedding day. No doubt everyone in Aquae Sulis was speculating about why he’d saved Amelia and her brother from the Agency, and he knew what most of them were thinking of his motive. They were probably right.

“William,” his father called from the doorway, “a word with you in my study.”

His father was already dressed for the wedding. Will excused himself and followed him in.

“Good morning, Father.” Will smiled, trying to give the best impression of a man ready to face his fate goodnaturedly.

“Close the door and sit down. We don’t have much time and I need to talk to you about something important.”

“Wisdom for married life?”

The stern glare burnt the cocky smile from Will’s lips. “I’ve just spoken with the Patroon. Everything is ready at the Oak. I know you were pushing to marry Catherine Papaver sooner than planned. No doubt you were surprised when I told you the new date.”

“A little. I assumed it was because Horatio’s accusations against her went public.” Will felt the muscles in his neck knotting. He’d worried that the marriage was happening far faster than a polite request from him and the threat of scandal could explain. He hadn’t told his father the real reason behind his desire to marry sooner than the end of the season, because he

didn’t want anyone else to know about the beating Catherine had suffered. It wouldn’t do anything except increase the chance of her being harmed again.

“Well, that’s true, and now his accusations have been made public I’m glad we moved quickly. Hopefully everyone will be too busy gossiping about the fall of the Roses to remember what he said about her.” He paused. “You’re certain the purity opal remained white?”

“Positive,” Will replied and wondered again whether it did change colour when he’d pressed it against her neck. Not that it would have changed the fact that he wanted to get her away from her father as soon as possible.

His father nodded, satisfied. “There’s something else, William. Once you’re married, the Patroon wants you to establish your residence in Londinium.”

“Londinium?”

“You’ve impressed him, and with the Rosas being rounded up by the Agency and their control of the city lost, this is the perfect time to further our interests there.”

“But surely this is something for one of your generation? Or Nathaniel, as the eldest?”

“The Patroon is not easily impressed, William, and neither am I. You handled the Rosa debacle with subtlety and quick wits, both of which will come in useful in Londinium. We want you to secure the Dukedom and bring the Court under our control.”

Will sat back, feeling the knots reach down his body and into his stomach. The Dukedom? It was beyond ridiculous. “I…It was a bit of a coup revealing the Gallica-Rosa treachery but it doesn’t exactly mark me

out for Duke material. I couldn’t have done it without the help of the Alba-Rosas; they warned me about Horatio.”

“Horatio said the Albas were just as guilty as he. Tell me, did they really come clean with you? Or did you lie to save them?” When Will didn’t immediately respond, his mouth twitched. “You wouldn’t be the first man to lie for the sake of a woman.”

“In all honesty, Father, I don’t think it’s as simple as Horatio claimed. I wouldn’t be surprised if there was some truth in it, but I think Amelia and Cornelius genuinely came to like me and didn’t wish me any harm. Amelia certainly did not do anything to jeopardise the engagement. On the contrary, she made an effort to be kind to Catherine.”

“Cornelius has cooperated with my staff but I don’t think you should ever trust him, or his sister. They could be useful to you, if you choose what you tell them with care and verify anything they tell you before acting upon it.”

“Surely it’s in their best interests to be trustworthy?”

Father raised an eyebrow. “It’s in their best interests to please you. That’s not the same thing in all situations. Never trust a Rose, William, you know that. And remember, a mistress can be very expensive.”

Will looked away, not wanting to discuss that with his father of all people. “I’m flattered, Father, but I can’t see how that one evening could qualify me for such a task.”

“You made excellent use of the information you uncovered, you kept calm and you managed the crowd magnificently. The Lavandulas have sent me letters expressing how impressed they are with you and have ensured there is a magnificent property waiting for you and Catherine. The Patroon’s staff are making it ready for your arrival after the honeymoon.”

“I had no idea the Lavandulas owned property in Londinium.”

“They’ve acquired several impressive houses as compensation for the crimes committed against them.”

“So the house once belonged to the Rosas?”

Father nodded. “Best not to think too much about that. Our people will make sure no traces of them are left behind.”

“But—”

“This isn’t a proposition, William. The decision has been made.”

Will put aside his doubts and irritation. They wouldn’t serve him now. “What support will I have to take the Dukedom?”

“A generous income, and the Patroon has assured me that should you need extra funds we will take care of that as a family. Do whatever it takes to impress the Great Families in Londinium. Lord Iris himself is behind this.”

“The Patroon said that?”

“He said enough. You know the Patroon was pushing for this marriage. He’s taking a greater interest in you. I don’t need to tell you how important it is that you succeed, do I?”

“No, Father.” Will said it in his most confident tone, but he knew the odds were more than stacked against him. “Do you think that Catherine is still the best choice, given this new remit?”

“Nothing has changed on that front,” his father replied, standing up. “I’m sorry, William, the agreement is too entrenched to change now. You’ll have to do all you can to bring her up to scratch, but Dame Iris will help too. She takes all new brides brought into the family under her wing to make sure they know what’s expected of them.”

“Good,” Will said, relieved. “I’m sure Catherine will be most grateful.” He stood, needing what little time he had alone to consider what he faced. “I need to dress for the wedding.”

His father stood too and reached across the table to shake his hand. “I’m proud of you, William. Don’t let me down.”

The faerie led Sam up a gentle hill, promising that the people he sought were very close. Just like before, exactly who he was looking for was on the other side. Four women and one man, all blonde, all looking dazed and horribly lost.

“Hey!” Sam waved from the top of the hill and they drew closer together fearfully. As he ran down the slope he could see the sparkling bands that had been around their ankles were gone.

“Who are you?” one of the women asked.

“Are you from home?”

“Can you help us?”

Sam grinned. “I’m here to rescue you.” He’d always wanted to say that. “I live in Bath. I’m going to take you home, to your families.” He scanned their faces, looking for relief and gratitude but seeing doubt and fear instead. “I’m like you, a mundane,” he added.

“Have you got anything to eat?”

“I’ve got a packet of crisps and half a doughnut.”

“We’re starving,” one of the women said.

He recognised her from the photo on the TV appeal. Her name was Clare and she was a model. They all were. It was probably why they were taken and why it hadn’t bothered him that they were rather gaunt. He pulled his rucksack off his back and found the crisps.

“I wouldn’t give those to them,” the faerie said, zipping in between him and the others, who cowered away from it.

“Why not?”

“Don’t believe anything they say!” the man said, snatching the bag of crisps from his hand and opening them. They closed around him like pigeons around crumbs.

In moments they were retching and spitting out lumps of chewed potato. The man threw the packet on the ground and the faerie dashed behind Sam. “You think that’s some sort of sick joke?”

“I told you,” the faerie whispered.

“Oh, no.” Clare pointed to something behind Sam. “It’s one of them.”

Sam turned to see Lord Poppy strolling down the hill, swinging his black cane back and forth. He was exactly the same as the last time Sam saw him—long black hair and black eyes with skin like a lily petal—bringing back unwelcome memories of being licked in the ear and held by poppies as the Fool’s Charm was broken. He wished Cathy was with him to step forward and handle it. He realised the models were hiding behind him instead.

“Ah! The little mundane my favourite brought to me! Did she send you back as a gift this time?”

“No, she did not!” Sam pressed against his wedding ring with his thumb. The last time they met he wasn’t wearing it. “And before you try anything dodgy—” he thrust his left hand towards Poppy’s face, fingers spread “—I’m protected by Lord Iron.”

“How terribly exciting for you. Could you explain why that’s relevant? Am I threatening your person?”

Sam lowered his hand, aware of the people cowering behind him as if he were the only thing protecting them from a rabid dog. “Um…”

“Irrelevant then, it seems. And it’s such an ugly ring. Wouldn’t you rather take it off and put it in your pocket so its ugliness isn’t inflicted on everyone around you?”

Sam nodded, pulled it from his finger and did as Poppy suggested. He wondered why the people behind him were groaning.

Poppy's smile didn't seem to cheer them up. "Now tell me, has my faerie been helpful?"

The faerie fluttered next to Lord Poppy, giving Sam a hopeful smile. "Yeah."

"She brought you into Exilium, I understand."

"Yeah."

"And led you to these poor little waifs and strays."

"Yeah."

"And what do you plan to do with them? No one wants them. They're soiled now. They smell of the Rose. Never has a scent been so unfashionable."

"I'm going to take them home."

Poppy tittered and watched Sam for a moment. "You're telling the truth!" He flapped his free hand as the faerie accompanied his melodic laughter with its own soprano harmony.

"What's so funny? They were kidnapped!"

"But," Poppy said, dabbing at the corner of his eye with a slender finger, "they'll die if you take them back to Mundanus."

Sam glanced at the crisp packet at his feet. Would they be incapable of eating anything at home? Or was that something to do with being in Exilium? "We're willing to take the risk." He twisted to look at them. "Right?"

All of them nodded.

"So be it."

"And we're leaving now."

“So soon? But we’ve hardly had a chance to enjoy the day. It’s a very special one. My favourite is being married to a very pretty boy.” Sam had been certain Cathy had more time. “They moved the date,” Poppy added. “She’s captivated the Iris boy to the extent that he begged his father to marry them as soon as possible. Isn’t that romantic?”

But she had been determined to find a way out. Sam jolted. That’s what he needed to do! “We need to go now.”

“Before we’ve settled my compensation?”

“Oh, no.” Sam sighed. “Look, I told you—”

“Because it would be so dreadfully impolite to accept help from my faerie—twice—and simply leave without a token of your gratitude. Or rather two of them.”

Sam folded his arms. “Like that time you took one of my memories?”

“Yes, but I don’t want another. I took the one I liked the best, the rest are horribly dull. No, I want you to do two things for me, such easy tasks. It being my favourite’s wedding day has filled me with generosity, it seems. You’re lucky she likes you. Otherwise I would have cursed you to believe you’ll die if you don’t bray like a donkey and given you an irresistible urge to visit the ones you most want to impress in Mundanus.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“Take a message to Catherine. That’s all. And then in one month—or perhaps less—you’re to deliver something to me.”

“But I don’t know how to find her.”

“Then you’d better work it out. Otherwise I shall be displeased. Now, the message is this—and take care to recite it perfectly, otherwise your debt won’t be paid.” Sam nodded. “‘Dear Catherine, Your friend accepted my help in Exilium. As payment, I require the painting you promised to me the

last time he visited before the next Mundane new moon. It must contain an Iris secret. Your *true* patron, Lord Poppy.’”

“Hang on a minute!” Sam said. “You said my taking the message was payment, not her giving you a painting!”

“Ah, the painting is in return for not turning your fingers into hungry rats with a taste for your flesh. I think that’s most generous.”

Sam couldn’t reply. He just blinked a few times, trying to drive the image from his mind. “OK…tell me the message again.”

Poppy repeated it. Backwards. Sam’s temples started to throb as the faerie giggled.

“Fine, I got it,” he said, trying to sound confident. “Do I just take the painting to the church again?”

“No. That’s such an inelegant way to bring my favourite’s masterpiece. Simply stand in front of a mirror, say my name three times with the desire to come here and you’ll be able to step through. Of course, should you wish to visit before then, or—” he looked pointedly at the people behind Sam “—bring me other gifts in return for saving certain doomed souls, you’ll be quite welcome.”

“OK. Thanks.” He didn’t want to thank him but he had to get at least one thing right. “We’ll be off then.”

“But how will you leave?” the faerie asked.

“You’ll take me back, won’t you?”

“Only if you give me something in return,” Poppy said.

“Oh, for the love of…If you don’t let us go, I can’t give Cathy the message, can I?”

“I could find another way and give you an alternative compensatory task if you wish.”

“No. No…I’ll…” He looked at the faerie and at Poppy, understanding even more clearly Cathy’s frustration with the Sorcerer and his unwillingness to help. He put his hands in his pockets in an effort to look relaxed and not at all panicky, and his fingers brushed the wedding ring. He clasped it tight, horrified he’d taken it off. “I’ll find my own way out. Thanks.” He started walking as Poppy laughed. “Come on then!” he called back to the others and they followed him.

“I’ll join you,” Poppy said. “A stroll before the wedding is just what I need. Do you know where you’re going?”

Sam marched on but Poppy matched his pace effortlessly. “Out of Exilium.”

“Oh, this is simply divine entertainment,” Poppy breathed. “If only I could bottle it and save it for dull days. But Catherine would be upset if I rendered you into a few drops of hopeless optimism. I have no desire to upset her when I can’t see it.”

Sam tried to ignore him, pressing the ring painfully into the palm of his hand to keep his focus on it. There had to be a place he could get them out. Surely Exilium had a border?

“How long do you plan to walk? Your waifs look so dreadfully hungry. Poor little things. Perhaps I could take them in, I’ll need something to play with after the wedding. I fear I might feel a little upset by the sight of my strange sunlit one becoming an Iris.”

Sam had the urge to veer left. Was that Poppy, the faerie or something else? He slowly changed their direction and Poppy didn’t seem to notice. He pressed on.

“Oh, look, over there is a patch of daisies in the shape of a teardrop. If you can guess what made it, I’ll grant you a boon.”

“No, thanks,” Sam said. He was on to something, he could feel it.

“A missed opportunity is a dreadful thing. I could have given you the ability to know a woman’s desire. Or a man’s, should you wish it.”

Sam shook his head. “Not far now,” he said to the others. Then he saw something ahead: a huge pillar driven into the earth, the grass around it yellowed and coarse. A fogbank hung in the air on the other side of it as far as he could see, so dense the ground seemed to stop where it began, as if forming the edge of Exilium. The pillar looked like it was made of iron with copper bands riveted around it and was about six feet tall. It was covered in symbols and things that looked like algebraic equations written by an insane mathematician. Several thick iron chains ran from the top of the pillar and disappeared into the ground.

Poppy had also stopped and planted his cane in the ground. “Well, I need to go to the wedding now,” he said, turning slightly so the shape up ahead would be out of his sight. “I look forward to your delivery—whichever one it may be. Time for you to leave.”

He pushed Sam backwards with the tip of his cane, so hard it hurt. The panic of falling made his arms pinwheel and seemed to go on for longer than it should. There was a horrible pop in his ears, a brief pain in his sinuses and his stomach rose up like he’d fallen several metres instead of onto his backside.

One second he saw blue sky as he tipped back and the next a white ceiling. His hands sank into a deep pile rug and there was the scent of cologne. Before he could even take in the room Clare landed next to him and then the others, as if they had fallen through an invisible hole in the ceiling. One of them landed on a chaise-longue, the rest on the rug next to Sam.

“Good God!”

A man in his sixties was on the other side of the room with a butler tying a bit of white cloth around his neck like a weird tie.

Poppy's faerie appeared next to the older man and whispered in his ear as the servant came over and pulled Sam to his feet.

"Oh…I see," the man said. "Well…where should I send them?"

The faerie whispered something back and a twitch at the corner of the man's mouth made Sam nervous. He nodded and went to the door leading out of the room as the others were pulled onto their feet, just as disoriented as he felt.

"This way," the man said, opening the door and gesturing for them to go through. Sam couldn't see a room on the other side, just a haze.

"Where does it go?"

"Home," he said. "I have a wedding to go to. Will you please hurry along?"

Sam wondered if they were in the Nether, as the Sorcerer's house was, so he looked out of the window. The familiar silver mists confirmed his suspicion. "Come on," he said to the others. "We need to go. And I think we should all hold hands, in case something weird…I mean *more* weird happens." They did as he asked. Clare slipped her hand into his to join them together.

Wanting it to be over as soon as possible, he ran out of the room. His ears popped again, there was a rush of cold air and he found himself—and mercifully the others—in the central reservation of a motorway. It was dark and cold and he didn't have a clue where they were, but car fumes had never tasted so good.

3

The servants were lined up outside the house when the butler opened the front door. Everything was misty white through Cathy's veil. Her mother's hand cupped her elbow, steering her forwards, as Cathy's legs still felt as if they belonged to someone else. As they emerged, she saw the carriage waiting, decorated with red poppies, looking more like something to transport people to a war memorial in Mundanus. It seemed appropriate.

"Best wishes to you on your wedding day, Miss Papaver," the butler said with a bow.

"Health, wealth and happiness," the cook said, curtsying, and the same was repeated down the line.

The footman helped her into the carriage and her father was waiting inside. Once the train of the dress had been arranged under her mother's critical eye, the door was shut and there was a familiar lurch as the carriage pulled away.

Father was dressed in a black morning suit with a poppy-red waistcoat and one of the blooms buttonholed in the lapel. It suited him; the dark colours matched his black moustache and peppery hair. He wore his usual funereal expression as he took in her garb.

"You look very…nice," he finally said. Then he peered through the veil, studying her glassy eyes, and tutted. He lifted the gauze, which was edged with crystals, and planted a dry kiss in the centre of her forehead, whispering a few words as he sat back. A wisp of smoke reached towards his lips for a brief moment, then Cathy shuddered and felt like she

expanded into her own body, as if she'd been dozing at the back of a room all morning.

"Take a few deep breaths," he said. "It takes a moment to wake fully."

She batted the veil up and away from her face, looking down at the white gown, taking it in properly for the first time. She could feel the crush on her chest of an impending panic attack, horrified that she'd been sleepwalking her way into the wedding day she desperately needed to avoid.

"You…you…" The terrible things she wanted to call her father were so plentiful she couldn't settle on one. "Sly, evil…"

"Don't say anything you may regret later, Catherine."

"How could you do this? You drugged me!"

"Your mother and I decided it was the best course of action."

"That doesn't make it right! My God, I knew you were both cold…evil people but this! Drugging your own daughter so—"

"Be quiet!" The commanding boom he'd perfected in the army was still with him. "I want to have a conversation with you, not sit here and be insulted. I could have waited until we arrived at the Oak to fully revive you, but I felt it was important we speak whilst we can."

"Am I supposed to be grateful?" She almost choked. Now she wasn't shouting, she could feel the anger trying to escape in tears but she was determined not to dissolve, and certainly not in front of him. The first and last time she'd broken down in his study he'd beaten her until she'd passed out.

"You have a choice, Catherine. Have a civil conversation with me now, and learn something in the process, or continue to demonstrate all of the qualities that have precipitated our treatment of you. If you insist on being

rude, disrespectful and rebellious, you will be treated as a spoilt, worthless child with no sense of duty or honour. Which will it be?"

Cathy permitted herself one moment of fantasy, in which she punched him squarely in the face and shouted all the things that burned in her chest, then forced herself to think strategically. He was right: she did have a choice, just not the one he offered. She could rant and vent all her fury, or she could start looking for a way out.

"That's better," he said, interpreting her silence as a victory. "Now, I've been giving this journey a great deal of thought over the past day or so. It's the last time you'll be in my care. After today, another man and another family will be responsible for your wellbeing."

She sucked in a breath to cool the scream building in her throat. In less than thirty seconds he'd unknowingly summed up one of the roots of her rebellion: the idea that she was nothing but a delicate piece of property.

"As such," her father continued, "I felt I should say a few things to you that I have neglected to over the years. I'm a man of few words, as you know."

You prefer violence, she wanted to snap at him, but she kept that inside too.

"I confess I've struggled to comprehend your behaviour. It started early on, when you simply refused to delight in the things that all little girls like. You have a stubborn streak that is most unbecoming and, frankly, I had no idea it would result in the despicable way you ran away and hid from us for so long."

"You made your disappointment perfectly clear to me when I was brought home."

"I haven't finished. And you're doing it again. Just listen." He paused, waiting to see if she'd acquiesce. She focused on expressing all her hatred

in her silent glare. “You know I’ve been angry with you, on many occasions. I simply could not understand why you continuously rejected every effort we made to give you the very best life. Dresses, dolls, the best dancing and singing teachers, all manner of things your sister adored, you threw back at us and simply refused to even try.”

“That’s not true. I did try to do all those stupid things you wanted and I can’t! I’m just not made that way.”

“You can’t even speak in a civil manner.” He shook his head. “I’m constantly ashamed that I have failed to make you into an accomplished young lady. We are so very lucky that events have transpired to make this marriage happen, otherwise I have no idea what would have become of you.”

Her fists were clenched so tight Cathy feared she’d split her knuckles. She took a breath but he held up a hand.

“I haven’t finished. Your lack of gratitude and your supreme lack of appreciation for the privileges you have enjoyed astound me. I have seen people suffer, Catherine, really suffer in the most unimaginably awful situations, and to see you pouting and refusing to participate and even be courteous when you have such a blessed life quite frankly disgusts me.”

She looked away, feeling a sharp stab of truth in his words.

“I realised last night that one of the other reasons you have infuriated me so is…” He paused, and she looked back to see him searching for the right words in a way she’d never witnessed before. “…is because I believe we’re far more alike than I’ve ever wanted to admit.”

She gawped at him. “Really?”

“You know very little about me. You’ve never expressed any curiosity. I thought it might interest you to know that when I came of age and was

presented to the Patroon to make my request, I too did not ask for what my parents expected of me."

Cathy blinked, unable to imagine even a shred of rebellion in the stilted, repressed rod of a man that was her father. She remembered his rage when she'd asked to go to university instead of the shallow beauty or grace Charm her mother had pressed for. He'd never once let it slip that he'd done the same.

"What did you ask for?"

"To fight in the First World War."

"But I thought that was a tradition for Rhoeas-Papaver men—to be in the army, I mean."

"The First World War was seen as too dangerous for active service. It was very different, what with the Gatling guns mowing down the officers in such numbers. Our family has served in many military campaigns over the ages, when our interests were under threat, or when some young blood wanted a taste of glory, but no one was permitted a commission when they saw what was happening in the trenches."

"But you wanted to go out there?"

"I turned twenty-one in 1916. I was desperate to get out there and give the Hun a damn fine kicking, but the pater said no. So I asked the Patroon, and he had to say yes."

Cathy saw a spark of something in his eyes that she'd thought impossible: spirit. "Were they angry with you?"

"Furious. Got a beating, but I took it. No doubt something will be said about it today."

Cathy remembered the wedding. There would be family there, her grandparents right back to her great-great-great-grandparents, possibly older. She didn't bother to keep track as they'd never shown any signs of

being interesting. But having heard her father speak, she wondered if that assessment was correct. Perhaps they all hid their interesting quirks too well. Even though it was intriguing, she still didn't want to be there.

"If you knew what it's like to have to ask for something you need to do, even when everyone else says no, why were you so hard on me?"

He frowned as he considered her question. "I wondered that myself, I must confess. I realised it was because you asked for something selfish. I wanted to defend Albion, and England. I wanted to risk my life in a noble cause. You just wanted to rebel."

"Not for the sake of it!" Cathy realised he saw her as nothing more than a horrible child; he had no idea what it had been like for her. "You say I threw stuff back in your face but every time I tried to explain you hit me. Mother thought I kept messing up my embroidery deliberately but I was just rubbish at it. And then she'd tell you and then you'd beat me again. What was I supposed to do?"

"Take it on the chin," he replied, as if he were talking about being gently teased. "Try harder. It's your duty to represent your family in the best way you can."

Try harder. In the early days she did try so hard to please them but she gave up when she realised there was no way to be the child they wanted. Miss Rainer's lessons had increased the gulf between them by giving her other things to aspire to and revealing how stagnated Nether Society's attitudes were in comparison to Mundanus. "All this duty crap is just a way to control people, and keep control. If I'd been born in Mundanus—"

"You were not," he cut in. "You were born into one of the most respected families in Aquae Sulis. Why not accept your life and your role in Society?"

“But you didn’t accept it when your father told you not to fight in the war.”

He pursed his lips. “That’s completely different. You’re about to marry into one of the most wealthy and powerful families in Albion. You’ll never want for anything, you’ll have security for yourself and your children, respect in Society—if you don’t destroy that with your wilful behaviour.”

“But I don’t even want children!”

He paled. “Catherine, that is the wish of every woman.”

She wanted to drum the seat of the carriage with her fists but she wasn’t going to waste her first opportunity to try and make him understand where she was coming from. “Just because women are capable of giving birth it doesn’t make that the only thing we should aspire to. There are women in Mundanus who run successful businesses, who lead countries! Powerful, accomplished women doing amazing things, and you just want to trade me like a piece of bloody porcelain!”

“There’s no speaking to you.” He looked out of the window, though there was nothing to see except the mists of the Nether.

“You just can’t handle it when I say things you don’t want to hear and can’t beat me for it.”

She watched him struggle with his anger. Eventually he sighed, closing his eyes. “Catherine, this isn’t just me, it’s what Society expects of you, and what our patrons demand of us. I have always said that your wishes are irrelevant because there is no getting away from the fact that Lord Poppy has decided this marriage will happen. You should be grateful your fiancé had the foresight to request an earlier date.”

“Will wanted to marry sooner?” Cathy couldn’t understand it.

“Yes, and Lord Iris himself must have sanctioned moving the date. I can’t see any other way the Oak would be available, and everything

arranged with such short notice. You gave us no choice but to accept. We had to make sure this happened, by whatever means necessary. I don't enjoy forcing you into this, Catherine. I'm simply doing my duty."

"But there must be a way to—"

"Enough! Turn all this energy into planning how you will make William happy, or I warn you, Catherine, he could make your life most miserable indeed. Any talk of avoiding this marriage is utterly futile."

"I managed to make a life in Mundanus and people would say that's impossible. It's not a crime to not want to marry a man I hardly know!"

"You think your mother and I knew each other? We met on two occasions before we were married, the first at a garden party, the second at our engagement ball. You've been infected by some romantic ideas from Mundanus. It just isn't like that here. We do things the way they've always been done, and I will not risk my entire family's honour just because you refuse to toe the line."

"Toe the line? This is slavery by another name!"

"That's it, if you—"

A flash of red at the window distracted them. One of Poppy's tiny faeries, in the same red petal dress as the last time Cathy saw her, was tapping on the glass.

Father knocked loudly on the roof of the carriage and the driver halted the horses. The door was opened and the faerie fluttered inside, clapping her hands joyfully at the sight of Cathy's dress.

"Oh! It's so exciting!" She twisted in the air to look at Cathy's father. He knocked on the roof to start the carriage again once the door was shut. "Are you the favourite's father?"

"I am." He inclined his head respectfully.

“What do you want?” Cathy asked, a thousand awful possibilities coming to mind with little effort.

“Lord Poppy wanted to make sure you looked perfect.”

“That’s very thoughtful of him,” Father said.

“He said that when he sees his favourite arrive, he wants to weep bitter-sweet tears.”

“Lord Poppy is at the Oak?” Father asked as Cathy felt nauseous.

“And Lord Iris!” The faerie pirouetted in the air. “That’s why Lord Poppy sent me. Now close your eyes and I’ll make sure he isn’t disappointed.”

“Have you ever met any Fae royalty?” Ekstrand asked.

Max shook his head. “No, sir.”

“Well, it should be an education to you then. Do you have all you need?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Then let’s be off.”

Using his silver-tipped cane, Ekstrand opened a Way from the ballroom to a familiar mundane field, the one where he and Axon had picked up the puppet after she’d been left there by the Censor of Aquae Sulis. It was early in the morning and the sun hadn’t risen high enough to evaporate the dew off the grass or burn off the mist. Max took a deep breath of the fresh air as the Sorcerer then opened a Way into Exilium. He had not wanted to risk opening one directly from his house.

The mundane grass looked grey compared to the sun-soaked meadow Max saw through the opening. He stepped through first, checked that no Fae or faeries were nearby and then beckoned to Ekstrand to follow.

Ekstrand closed the Way behind him, whispered something beneath his breath and struck the earth with the cane. Max felt the ground vibrate, like a little shockwave had rippled out from it, and the grass bent as if flattened by a brief gust of wind.

“Let’s bring one of them here,” Ekstrand said, adjusting his cape. “I have no desire to traipse across the prison, and the beauty of the Palace would be lost on you anyway. Besides, it’s always good to remind them of the pecking order, wouldn’t you agree?”

“Yes, sir,” Max replied.

“Especially on a Friday,” Ekstrand added.

Max leaned on his walking stick while Ekstrand only rested his hand lightly on his cane. The sun was gentle but Max adjusted the brim of his hat so he could see all around them without squinting. They were standing at the top of a hill. There was nothing but meadow and blue sky, a warm breeze and trees in the distance. He remembered victims talking about how Exilium looked like a dream of a perfect place, too colourful to be real. For Max, immune to such things, it looked like it could be anywhere in the Cotswolds.

Ekstrand was scowling. “I must raise this at the Moot. It’s too pretty here. Damnable Fae.”

Max was about to ask what he meant when a figure came into view, climbing the rise of the hill steadily, clearly one of the Fae. He was tall, slender, like they all were, dressed in a tail-coat and trousers, cut somewhat like those Ekstrand wore. He wore a circlet of oak leaves instead of a top hat, however, and his cape looked like it was woven from thousands of oak leaves, reaching down to the ground and spilling behind him for many metres.

“Only the Prince?” Ekstrand sniffed. “I’m insulted.”

“Good day to you, Sorcerer of Wessex, King of the lands between the Tamar and the Arun, the Severn and the dividing sea, holder of the plains of Avalon and Salisbury, keeper of Avebury and Stonehenge and the ancient southern forest.”

Max knew he would be ignored; the Fae found it impossible to see Arbiters as people. The Prince gave him the briefest glance, presumably to check he wasn’t about to throw a copper net over him. The Prince’s eyes were a vibrant green, no discernible pupil, iris or humour, just green. His hair was the colour of polished oak, rippling in long waves down his back.

“Is the King too busy to answer my summons?” Ekstrand made no effort to disguise his irritation.

“The King sent me, knowing you would wish to discuss the recent events in your domain. I am personally overseeing the matter and was judged to be of more help to you.”

“I want to speak to Lady Rose.”

“I’m afraid that’s impossible,” the Prince said with a smile.

“I beg your pardon?”

“She’s being punished.” The Prince spread his hands. “It’s what you wished, is it not?”

“I left that to the King and Queen to decide. I merely made them aware of her crimes.”

“And they were of such severity that she’s been stripped her of her status, and her influence in the Court and the Nether destroyed. We can assure you, with confidence, that she and her brothers are unable to interfere with Aquae Sulis now.”

Max studied the Prince’s face, the soft voice, the smile that never left him. He could understand Lady Rose’s status suffering as a result of the embarrassment of being escorted away from her own party by an Arbiter,

but to strip her and her brothers of everything, even dominion over their own puppets, seemed more than merely harsh. It was disproportionate.

“I should imagine Lady Lavender was furious,” Ekstrand said. “I had no idea the royal family cared so much for appeasing her.”

The Prince remained silent, the gentle smile still present.

“However, I cannot imagine how an audience with me would interfere with Rose’s punishment,” Ekstrand continued. “On the contrary, I should imagine it would only deepen her misery. I want her brought to me at once.”

“As I said, dear Sorcerer, that’s not possible. But as soon as her punishment is over, I will gladly escort her to you. Personally.”

“When will that be?”

“I cannot imagine it taking any longer than three mundane years.”

“That isn’t acceptable.” Ekstrand twisted the cane in his irritation.

“That isn’t negotiable,” the Prince said. The Sorcerer’s growing anger didn’t seem to concern him at all. “I’m sorry if it’s an inconvenience, but may I remind you that the treaty of the Split Worlds merely gives you permission to keep us from Mundanus. It doesn’t extend to your making demands of our royalty when the matter in hand doesn’t concern any innocents. This is, as you would say, an internal matter. Lady Rose is one of our own and we are punishing her ourselves. You have no right to interfere with that.”

Ekstrand’s lips were nothing more than a thin line. Max knew he wouldn’t be able to push it further; to do so would reveal there was more at stake than he could risk the Fae royal family discovering. That, and the fact the Prince was correct. Ekstrand had the right to use Arbiters to keep the Fae out of Mundanus, and the right to stop any actions on their part that

could lead to the kidnapping, death or exploitation of an innocent. Nothing more.

“I’ll remember this,” Ekstrand said.

“I’m sure you will,” said the Prince. “As will I. I recall every conversation we have ever had, Sorcerer of Wessex, every slight, every demand, every wound. Whatever business you have with the Rose will have to wait. In the meantime it may be of benefit to you to watch the Irises. I understand they’re powerful in your domain.”

“The Irises have never been any trouble,” Ekstrand said. “Unlike some of your people, they understand the need to obey the treaty and stay in the Nether.”

“But a stone thrown in the Nether has ripples in Mundanus, dear Sorcerer, you know that. The Rose is destroyed, her power broken. Look to the Irises if you want to worry about a family’s influence. Now our business is concluded, I bid you good day.”

Ekstrand said nothing as the Prince walked away. Once the Fae was out of sight he opened a Way back into the mundane field and then another into the ballroom once he was sure no one else was there.

“No right to interfere,” he muttered to himself as he unhooked the cape at his throat and left the room.

Max followed him and was about to ask for his orders when Petra intercepted them in the hallway.

“Mr Ekstrand, I was checking the data in the monitoring room when I noticed this.” She handed him a piece of paper. “I thought you should know.”

Ekstrand scanned it and clicked his tongue. “I told you we should have killed him.” He turned to Max. “That mundane, the one who was Charmed, he’s been back to Exilium. Unescorted. See to him would you?”

Cathy and her father rode the rest of the way to the Oak in silence once the faerie had gone. It was impossible for Cathy to tell whether the magic had done something spectacularly awful or wonderful; her father was inscrutable.

The lack of scenery made the silence unbearable. Every minute she came up with an argument to present, but then a predictable counter-argument surfaced just as quickly. Then she realised he would never help her get out of it, and the chances of escape had diminished to near zero. Two Fae lords were going to be there and both were highly motivated to see the marriage take place.

But she couldn't just give in and she refused to accept it was the end of her hope for freedom. Even if the worst happened, and there was no way to postpone the event and then escape before it could be rescheduled, she could still get away after they'd married. It could be worse, she thought, I could be marrying Ming the Merciless. Then the nervous giggling started, followed swiftly by the urge to cry.

"I understand it's natural for the bride to be nervous," her father said. "Just be brave, pay attention to when you have to speak and what you have to say, and the day will go smoothly, I'm sure of it."

"You make it sound easy."

"In many ways it is, Catherine."

She tried to imagine him as a rebellious young man. She failed. "Were you scared, when you went over the top in the war?"

He looked down at the carriage floor. "I was more angry than afraid."

"With the top brass?"

"No, my father."

Cathy frowned. "I don't understand."

“He Charmed me before I left. I didn’t know about it until I first saw action. Made it impossible for me to be killed by bullets or small pieces of shrapnel. Of course, if I’d stepped on a mine, I’d have been done for, but it still did enough.”

“I didn’t think Charms like that existed.”

“It was very powerful. He almost bankrupted the family and had to make a terribly serious bargain with Lord Poppy to get it.”

“Why were you angry though? Surely it made it all a lot less scary.”

He shook his head, he looked so saddened by her question. “It deprived me of true bravery. All of my men faced death with such courage, but I knew it was very unlikely I’d die out there. I felt like a fraud.”

“So I suppose forcing me to marry someone is nothing compared to ordering men to their deaths.”

“We all have our duties, Catherine. For some it is to fight and die for their country. For you it is to marry a man and guarantee our prosperity in Aquae Sulis and the favour of our patron.”

What could she say to that? She kept her silence, exploring the world through her father’s eyes. Finally, she really understood why he’d been so exasperated with her. “I’m sorry I’m not what you wanted me to be,” she said, feeling the carriage slow down.

“Thank you.” For the first time she could remember, he smiled at her. It made him look like a different man. “I’m sorry I didn’t try to talk to you sooner. We’re here. Hold your head up high, you look beautiful. And remember you’ll always have Papaver blood, even when you have the Iris name.”

She looked up, hoping the tears would spread out rather than fall. Her father reached across and pulled the veil back over her face as the carriage door was opened. He stepped out but she couldn’t move.

She’d been to the Oak once before as a guest of a distant cousin’s wedding. Cathy wondered if it was really as spectacular as she remembered. The tree was one of the oldest oaks in England and existed in Mundanus, the Nether and Exilium. As far as she knew, that was unique. In the Nether, a grand structure had been built around it where all of the marriages in the Great Families took place. In her memory it was cavernous and intimidating.

Father held out his hand to her and she knew this was it. She wondered whether tripping and gashing her face open or breaking her ankle would be enough to force postponement. When his hand clasped hers and he guided her firmly she realised the silliness of the idea.

The pale stone building was on the scale of a majestic cathedral but with an organic quality, like it had grown rather than been built. There were no visible joints between stone blocks; the Gothic archway door and the building around it appeared to have been shaped out of a single piece of stone. Only powerful Fae magic could make something so impossibly beautiful.

The doors were open. Cathy could hear something calm and lilting being played by a string quartet. In the silence of the Nether, and with the acoustics of the cavernous space, the murmur of the waiting guests also floated outside.

Her mother’s carriage had arrived. She and Elizabeth emerged and the bridesmaid dress was duly fussed over. When they came over, their startled expressions told Cathy the faerie had done something noticeable at least.

“Oh, Catherine,” her mother said. Was her expression…pride? Cathy couldn’t be certain; she’d never seen it before. Glancing at Father, Mother asked “Did you…?”

“Lord Poppy sent a gift ahead,” he replied. “I understand he and Lord Iris are inside.”

“I think I shall faint,” Elizabeth gasped.

“Don’t be absurd.” Mother gave Elizabeth a hard stare. “No dramatics today, Elizabeth. This is Catherine’s day—yours will come soon enough.”

“Oh, God,” Cathy whispered as she saw Lord Poppy emerge, the faerie flitting about excitedly next to him.

Upon sighting her he clasped his hands theatrically over his heart and she saw a glittering tear roll down his cheek. “That’s exactly what I wanted,” he said, gliding towards her with outstretched hands as her family bowed and curtsied appropriately. “The bitterness of losing you, but the sweet pleasure of knowing you will be the perfect bride.”

Cathy wanted to vomit and imagined heaving all over his immaculate morning suit.

“Thank you for your gift, my Lord,” she made herself say, prompted by her father’s glare as he straightened up.

“Only the first part.” He swept the tear from his cheek with one of his long fingers. He kissed the sparkling droplet and it turned into a teardrop-shaped diamond.

Holding it delicately between thumb and forefinger, he pressed it against the base of her throat and she felt a tingle shoot around her neck. A tiny squeak slipped from Elizabeth’s mouth.

“There,” he said, pulling back, the diamond gone from his hand. “Now I will know where you are all day, so I don’t lose you in the celebrations afterwards. I would hate to miss my opportunity to congratulate you.”

She didn’t miss the wicked glint in his eye. You bastard, she thought, reaching up to feel the diamond held on what felt like a chain no thicker than a strand of hair. You knew I wanted to bolt.

“Your generosity humbles us, Lord Poppy,” her mother said.

“Oh, it’s nothing.” Lord Poppy smiled. “She is my favourite, after all.”

“May I present my other daughter, Elizabeth, my Lord?” Father said.

“You’re not at all like my favourite.” Poppy sounded disappointed as he looked at Elizabeth. It was probably the first time her sister regretted that truth. “All of your prettiness is on the outside. Is there anything more interesting inside?”

Elizabeth, unused to her beauty being met with such uninterest, was unable to answer. “I play the piano,” she managed to say.

“But do you allow the instrument to play you?” he asked. “I fear not. But you’re pretty enough to make a good match. Perhaps you’ll surprise me as much as your sister did. Now that is something to aspire to, wouldn’t you say?”

Her mouth opened but no witty retort or earnest pledge came out. Even though Cathy had wished her childhood inability to speak in public on Elizabeth a hundred times over, watching it actually happen was quite awful.

“Forgive me, my Lord, but has my brother arrived?” Cathy didn’t want to appear eager but couldn’t think of anything else to take his attention from her floundering sibling.

“Yes, with his teeny tiny wife. But you should be more concerned about whether your fiancé has arrived, no?”

“Has he?” Mother asked.

“Yes, and he is a handsome fellow. Well, I mustn’t indulge myself a moment longer, otherwise Iris will get irritable, and we don’t want that, do we?” He winked at Cathy, making her shudder. “I look forward to seeing you shine, my little sunlit one,” he whispered to her before he went back inside.

Elizabeth’s lower lip wobbled. “He hates me.”

“Hush now,” Father said. “He just wants to make a fuss of Catherine.”

“Believe me,” Cathy said, “If he hated you, he’d have made it much more obvious.”

“Put it out of your mind,” Mother said. “Look, there’s Nathaniel to escort you up the aisle. You can see it as a practice.”

Nathaniel nodded to them from the entrance. He was dressed in a similar dark frock coat to Father but wearing a waistcoat embroidered with tiny irises. The sight of him brightened Elizabeth, who slipped straight into her default mode of trying to garner the most attention. Imogen came into sight and was clearly judged to have the thicker waist of the two, speeding Elizabeth’s recovery even more.

“She has to walk up the aisle with Oliver Peonia.” Elizabeth waved at them. “How demeaning.”

Mother took the bouquet from the footman who’d gathered it from their carriage, and formally presented it to Cathy. “Carry this, and all of our best wishes with you,” she said, and actually smiled. Probably the relief, Cathy thought as she watched her mother go ahead.

Elizabeth dutifully arranged Cathy’s train and then went to Nathaniel, beaming as he kissed her hand. The bridesmaids and groomsmen paired off amidst a flurry of curtsies, bows and polite greetings. There was no best man or maid of honour for weddings within the Great Families.

Father looked at her. “It’s time, Catherine.”

She looked at the expectant faces of William’s siblings who were supposed to become her own and heard the congregation’s gentle murmur hush with expectation. Her guts cramped. “I can’t do this,” she whispered, the poppies in the bouquet quivering with her. She thought of Josh, the times they’d kissed, the evenings curled up next to him, laughing at bad sci-

fi films and gushing about the best ones. How could she even think of marrying any other man, let alone an arrogant Iris who wanted nothing better than to rise in the Society she needed to escape?

4

Over a hundred pounds poorer, Sam unlocked the front door as the sun was coming up over Bath. He ushered his charges inside and closed the door, listening to their teeth chatter. He'd had to tell the taxi driver who'd picked them up from the service station on the M6 that they were a dance troupe and he was their manager. Their minibus had been stolen whilst they were in the toilets, he'd said, before they'd even had a chance to change out of their costumes. The taxi driver looked them over, uninterested, and turned the meter on. Thankfully he wasn't the chatty type.

"Front room's first on the right," Sam said. "I'll put some toast on. Tea all round?"

They all nodded and staggered through the door. Sam filled the kettle, worrying about what to do next. He'd managed to persuade them to come home with him to at least try to eat and get a story together before they went to the police. They were easy to convince: starving and in shock. After dropping a couple of slices of bread into the toaster he tried to call Cathy again.

"It's me, Sam, the one you took into Exilium. Um…I really need to meet up with you. I had to go back there and rescue those dancers we saw and I think I might've fucked up. Just a little bit. Call me. Please. It's urgent."

He made a round of tea, using, for the first time, the tray they'd been given as a wedding present, after wiping the dust off it. They were all

slumped on the sofa and chairs and looked dreadful in the early-morning light. He wondered whether to call an ambulance.

All reached gratefully for the cups and cradled them, a couple starting to cry at the familiarity of it all.

Clare took a tentative sip and then spat it out. “What is this?”

“Tea.”

“It tastes…poisonous. I can’t drink this.”

Sam looked at the others. “Try yours.”

All of them were unable to keep it in their mouths, sending the weeping ones into hysterics. Sam heard the toaster pop up but didn’t hurry to the kitchen, thinking of the crisps. “Fuckington Stanley,” he whispered. Was Poppy right?

A noise in the hallway made him think the front door hadn’t been shut. He went out and bumped straight into the gargoyle.

“’Ello, Sam.”

He yelped. “What the fuck are you doing in my house?”

“Your front door was open,” Max said, stepping out from behind the gargoyle. “You’ve been in Exilium.”

“How did you know that?”

“It’s against the agreement Mr Ekstrand made with you before you left his house.”

Sam remembered promising not to tell anyone and the sting in his palm when he shook the Sorcerer’s hand. He looked at the skin there, seeing a tiny red spot, as if he’d been pricked with a pin. “Did he put something in my hand? Is that how you knew?”

“This is serious,” Max said. “You’re already a breach. How did you get back there?”

“Look, Poppy’s faerie helped me to rescue these dancers Cathy and I saw and there’s something wrong with them. I need your help.” He pointed at the front-room door.

Max poked his head round and returned to Sam. “The blondes,” he said to the gargoyle. “They were taken a while ago,” he said to Sam. “You shouldn’t have brought them back to Mundanus.”

“What was I supposed to do, leave them to starve in Exilium? Lady Rose took them and now she’s gone down no one else wants them.”

“I can’t help you,” Max said. “They’ll never be able to live in Mundanus again.”

“There must be something we can do!”

“Usually the tainted are taken to live in the Nether, but that’s not possible.”

“Why not?”

“The usual treatment isn’t available anymore.”

“Can’t Ekstrand take them in?”

Max shook his head. “He’d never agree to having tainted anywhere near him.”

“Stop calling them that!” Sam moved them to the kitchen and closed the door. “They’ve been kidnapped, had their bodies controlled…they’re traumatised. You have to help them. Isn’t that your job?”

“It’s part of my job to stop innocents from being taken. They’re no longer innocent.”

“So what do I do now? Isn’t there anything Ekstrand could do to help them?”

“Not that I’m aware of.”

“You’re seriously telling me the only chance they have to survive is in Exilium?”

“Yes, because of unfortunate recent events. A Charm from one of the so-called Great Families could help,” Max said. “Theoretically. I’ve never had to look into it.”

“Then take me to where Cathy is.”

“I can’t do that.”

“Why the fuck not?”

“It’s against the rules.”

“Sod the rules,” the gargoyle said. “Those people are going to die.”

Max looked at it for a long moment. “It’s not the only reason. If I take Sam to the puppets to save those people they’ll know something is wrong with the Chapter. It would send them a message: if we don’t have the resources to help the tainted, we don’t have resources to police them. Then more innocents would be taken.”

Sam rested against the countertop, feeling sick with fatigue. “Are you going to do anything?”

“Do you have a means of getting back into Exilium?”

Sam nodded. “I think Poppy knew this was going to happen.”

Max looked at the gargoyle and it raised its stone brow at Max, almost like they were having a conversation Sam couldn’t hear. “Then I’m going to leave here and forget what I saw. But if you go back there afterwards, or do anything else outside of Mundanus, Ekstrand is going to notice.”

“It’s not like I want to go back there. Anyway, if he’s not going to help he sure as fuck doesn’t have the right to bust me for having to go back there to do so.”

“Actually, he does.” Max said. “I’ll check on you when you get back. At least you have some protection.” He pointed at the wedding ring.

“Yeah,” Sam replied. “Brilliant. Now I’ve got to break it to those people that they’re never going to see their families again.”

“I can’t do this,” Cathy said again but Father didn’t seem to hear her, extending his arm with a silent invitation to slip her hand into its crook and stride on to her destiny. The air felt thick and the boned bodice too tight to draw a breath.

“Catherine.” His voice was low and soft to avoid attention.

“I can’t do this,” she repeated, the thought bouncing around in her head like an echo in a cave. She looked at the waiting carriages and wondered whether she could sprint over, push the driver off and make her escape like a Western stagecoach thief.

A pinprick at her throat drew her fingers to the diamond. Poppy knew she was tempted to run and was reminding her there was no way out today. She imagined throwing the bouquet on the ground and stamping on it whilst screaming hysterically. Then she accepted her father’s arm. The prickling faded as she took her first step towards the entrance, causing a flurry of final preparations from the rest of the wedding party.

Far too quickly she and her father were going through the doorway, the beauty of the vaulted roof and grand oak at the far end of the hall now fully evident. The walls running down the sides were more glass than stone, but they still didn’t let in enough of the diffuse silver light of the Nether. Above them, huge globes of glass were suspended from the ceiling holding what appeared to be thousands of sprites. The worst day of her life was about to happen in the most beautiful place she’d ever seen.

Rows of seats were filled with people who as one turned and looked at her as she entered. Instinctively she slowed, her body betraying her desire to flee from their attention. Another prickle from the jewel at her throat and a tightening of her father’s arm around her hand pulled her into the forwards rhythm once more.

She heard the ripple through the crowd and focused her attention on the hem of Elizabeth's dress in front of her. She couldn't look ahead, not towards William, it would make it too real. A tear slipped free, feeling cool against her hot cheeks and she bit her lip, fighting to keep the rest back. I hate you all, she thought, falling back on her rage to stop her from collapsing in a sobbing heap.

Then Elizabeth's dress veered to the left and Cathy realised she was almost at the end of the aisle. The Oak loomed ahead of her. Its russet leaves brought the memory of autumn into the great hall. She could see faeries flitting from leaf to leaf, peeping out to witness the marriage for the royal line. A terrible burning rose up from her stomach.

Her father stopped and gently held her arm so she followed suit. She was aware of people standing just ahead and her gaze fell from the Oak to two elderly gentlemen dressed in morning suits. One she recognised: the Papaver Patroon, Sir Papaver himself, who looked just as stern as she remembered. He appeared to be in his early sixties, but Tom had told her that he was rumoured to be over a thousand years old and had to have regular lessons in "modern speech". Her eyes were drawn to his unusually large earlobes, something she'd stared at whilst he'd lambasted her for asking to go to university.

The other elderly gentleman was presumably Sir Iris. He stood on the right, wearing an iris-blue waistcoat with his morning suit. He was taller and more imperious, with something of the hawk about his features, and he looked at her with undisguised surprise. No doubt he'd been warned to expect some plain Jane.

He was standing in front of William, who was now turning to face her. His smile was warm and his surprise was more subtle.

"Who gives this woman to be married to this man?" Sir Papaver asked.

“I, Charles Rhoeas-Papaver of Aquae Sulis, give Catherine Rhoeas-Papaver to be married to this man.” Her father’s voice was loud and strong.

“And do you vouch for her virtue in front of these witnesses?”

“I do.”

Elizabeth took Cathy’s poppy bouquet. Father relaxed his arm, and as her hand slid free he took it and passed it to the Patroon, who held it tightly, as if expecting her to run back down the aisle. With a small bow her father discharged his last duty and went to sit next to her mother.

The Patroon’s hand was cool and dry, while hers trembled in clammy horror.

“Who gives this man to be married to this woman?” Sir Iris asked.

“I, George Reticulata-Iris of Aquae Sulis, give William Reticulata-Iris to be married to this woman.”

Cathy hadn’t even noticed William’s father standing beside him. He bowed and sat down. Evidently it isn’t necessary to prove the man’s virtue, Cathy thought.

“Do you, Catherine Rhoeas-Papaver…” Sir Iris said, making her jump. Now she was facing the Patroon she could see Lord Iris and his striking white hair in her peripheral vision. She felt his scrutiny acutely. “…take William Reticulata-Iris to be your husband in accordance with the wishes of your family and patron?”

The moment stretched as her heartbeat became a thunderous roar in her ears. The insistent prickling at her throat faded into the background as she looked at William and tried to imagine him kissing her, touching her and expecting more than she was willing to give. She could see a white blob reflected in his dark-brown eyes and found it so hard to comprehend on a deep level that this was actually happening to her. After all she had done, after all she had tried to do, she’d failed.

But she still couldn’t say the words. The pain at her throat increased and even William’s studied serenity was showing signs of cracking.

But there was nothing to be done, and she suspected that if she didn’t answer, Lord Poppy would take her over. She’d heard the Fae could do that. No doubt that was another reason behind the necklace. They’re only words, she thought, trying to dilute the significance of it all. I don’t mean them, they’re just words.

“I do,” she croaked, another tear breaking free.

She could hear her mother’s sigh behind her and a rustling amongst the crowd accompanied the collective relief.

“Then repeat after me,” Sir Iris said, glaring at her, “I do faithfully promise…”

“I do faithfully promise…”

“To honour and obey my husband in all things.”

They stuck in her throat but she forced them out. Just words.

“To forsake all others and to bear my husband’s children…”

Just words.

“And to strive to please my husband and my new family till death do us part.”

The tears were rolling freely now. William was trying his best to look encouraging.

“Do you, William Reticulata-Iris, take Catherine Rhoeas-Papaver to be your wife, in accordance with the wishes of your family and patron?” said Sir Papaver.

“I do.” Not a hint of reluctance. He was an extraordinarily good liar. She needed to remember that.

“Then repeat after me. I do faithfully promise to protect my wife, provide for her comfort and defend her honour, until death do us part.”

He repeated it in one go and Cathy seethed. She'd pseudo-promised to bear children and give up her life altogether and all he had to do was ensure she had somewhere to live and duel anyone who badmouthed her.

The Patroons turned their backs and looked up at the tree. Two faeries burst out from the canopy, each holding a ring made of oak. As she watched them being dropped into the Patroons' hands Cathy couldn't recall ever seeing wooden wedding rings in Society.

Sir Papaver gave a ring to William, who took her left hand gently, waited for her fist to unclench and then held it at the tip of her finger.

Following the Patroon's guidance, he repeated, "With this ring, I thee wed. Let it be a reminder of your vows to me and my family as long as you live."

He slid it on easily, despite the clamminess, and she thought for a moment that it was far too large. She enjoyed the thought of being able to lose it easily. But when it reached the base of the finger, it tightened into a snug fit and gave off such a pulse of magic that she physically jolted. As she stared at it, the ring paled and took on a golden sheen.

Then the other ring was being held out to her for William. "With this ring, I thee wed. Let it be a reminder of your vows to me as long as you live." He didn't shudder when it shrank.

The Papaver Patroon stepped back and let Sir Iris take the centre. "I now declare you man and wife."

The hall was filled with polite applause. William lifted her veil and smiled at her, leaning in for a kiss. She stood rigid as his lips brushed hers. They were soft and he smelt of peppermint.

Imogen waited patiently, holding a new bouquet of brilliant blue irises. "Welcome to the Reticulata-Iris family," she said with a false smile and thrust it towards her.

After she took the flowers William extended his arm to her. When she just stood there, too dumbstruck to move, he gently took her free hand, tucked it in place and they set off back down the aisle as the congregation stood, still applauding.

Soon the din was behind them and they emerged into the Nether. “Are you all right?” William asked quietly, feeling her violent trembling.

Cathy couldn’t form words in any sensible order. She felt like she wanted to cry and throw up and faint all at the same time. He gently wiped the tears from one cheek and she flinched. “Don’t do that,” she said, disturbed by the intimacy of the gesture.

“I’m sorry. I just want you to feel better.”

“I hardly think you’re the one able to do that,” she snapped and then the attendants were offering congratulations and all she wanted to do was push them away and run.

William used the opportunity to back off from her for a few moments, long enough for her to feel guilty. He’d been forced as much as her, he just dealt with it better. She reached for his hand and when he came closer she whispered, “I’m sorry,” in his ear.

“Could I have a moment with my wife?” he asked, eliciting excited commentary on the first use of the word. He drew her away. “Thank you. We need to just get through today, all right? Just smile and nod, it’ll pass, then we’ll talk tonight.”

The conjugal night. Her stomach flipped unpleasantly. “I’ll try,” she said.

“You really do look wonderful, Catherine,” he said. “I want to try to make the best of this. I hope you will too.”

She couldn’t stop the tears. He turned her so her back was to the emerging guests, saying soothing nonsense whilst she sobbed as quietly as

she could.

“Catherine, I’m sorry, but there’s an Iris tradition we must observe now. You need to speak in private with my mother, before we can go in for the reception. She’s waiting for you.”

Cathy turned to see her new mother-in-law waiting nearby, holding a small gift-wrapped package. “I don’t want her to see I’ve been crying.”

“You’re not the first bride to cry afterwards,” he said. “She’s harmless, go on.”

Cathy walked unsteadily towards her. William’s mother was smiling, but didn’t exactly look happy. She had the demeanour of someone waiting to inform a relative of an accident, rather than give a gift to a new daughter-in-law. Cathy realised it probably wasn’t far from the truth. She certainly felt the need for commiseration more than congratulations.

“Hello, Catherine. Come with me.”

Cathy was led to a nearby building where the reception would be taking place. It was in the same style as the Oak’s hall but on a smaller scale. They entered through a side door and went straight into a small room with two chairs and a table where tea was already laid out.

“Sit down,” her mother-in-law said.

Cathy did so, wondering whether her makeup was magical enough to have not ended up in rivulets down her cheeks.

“Tea? I suggest you take some now, whilst you can.”

Cathy nodded, worried that if she spoke her voice would crack. William’s mother had the same eyes as her son and a quiet grace. She looked less than five years older than her. It was strange to think she’d borne children and been married longer than Cathy had been alive.

Cathy took the cup from her and it rattled in the saucer. “Sorry,” she whispered, unable to bring the trembling under control.

“I understand. I sat where you are now, some years ago, talking to William’s paternal grandmother, and I shook so much she commented on how loudly my teeth were chattering.”

Cathy smiled as best she could, grateful at the attempt to put her at ease even if it was ineffectual. The tea was strong and hot and, despite everything, comforting.

“We’re about to have the same conversation I had all those years ago but before we begin, I should like you to call me Mother from now on.”

“All right.” Cathy cleared her throat. “As you wish, Mother.”

That earned another smile. “Good. I do understand how overwhelming this is. Your life has changed forever and it will take time to adjust. However, as a bride married into the Iris family, there’s something you need to know about before the reception.”

She held out the package. Cathy set down the cup and saucer to take it from her. She untied the blue ribbon and unwrapped the gift. It was a pair of long evening gloves, beautifully made from iris-blue silk.

“Thank you,” she said. “They’re lovely.”

“They are very important. You may have felt a little flutter when the ring was placed on your finger…”

“When it shrank to fit, yes.” Cathy looked at the ring again. It was hard to believe it had ever been made of wood.

“It wasn’t just the adjustment. A Charm has been placed upon you, as on all new Iris brides, Catherine, just as it was placed on me.”

Cathy’s tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth. Her heart, which had been settling into a normal rhythm, started to pound again. “What Charm?”

“Only an Iris man may touch you now. If a man other than William touches your skin, it will leave a mark on you and burn him.”

“What?” Cathy sounded stupid in her shock.

“I was just as surprised as you were. Take a moment,” Mrs Iris said, offering her the cup and saucer again. She set it back down when Cathy just stared at it.

“What if my brother kissed my cheek?”

“He must not.”

“What if…what if the Shopkeeper shook my hand?”

“He must not, Catherine. You must always attend public functions gloved, and only ever present your hand. The mark, I am told, lasts until your husband chooses to lift it.”

“This is awful!” Cathy stared at the ring. “Did he know?”

“William? No, his father will be speaking to him now.”

But you knew, Cathy thought. She’d only met William’s mother twice, very briefly, and had no idea what she was like. If her own mother was anything to go by Cathy knew it would be best to stay calm and not show any anger. That always closed down the conversation with her mother and set them at odds. Perhaps, if she did things differently right from the start, her mother-in-law could be an ally.

“I can see it’s a shock but, as my mother-in-law said to me, only a woman who covets the touch of another man would be upset by this.”

Cathy pressed her lips together, choking on the beginning of a tirade against the patriarchy and how that kind of thinking allowed this barbarism to continue. Could she keep it all in long enough to get through this conversation, let alone the rest of the day? The rest of her life? No, just today, she promised herself, just shut up and get through today and then you can find a way out.

Her silence was making Mrs Iris uncomfortable. “I suggest you drink your tea. When you’re ready to go to the reception, put on the gloves and I’ll escort you back in.”

Cathy looked at the silk gloves. The thought of putting them on to go and smile and curtsy after this made her feel sick to the stomach. Holding in the rage and the urge to sob was making her chest ache. Shouldn't she say something? Wasn't quiet conformity to this misogynistic farce perpetuating the problem?

"I didn't want to marry either," Mrs Iris said gently. "In fact, I doubt any marriage that has taken place in front of that tree was entered into with a glad heart. It will get easier."

"How did you cope?" Cathy asked. "Didn't you feel angry?"

Mrs Iris picked up her tea cup and saucer again. "Anger is not becoming in a lady. I knew that pushing against the inevitable would only make it hurt more. Let it go. It's done, find new friends, find a hobby, bear your children and you will be left in peace."

"I'm not like you," Cathy said, unable to stop her voice cracking. "What if I can't just grin and bear it?"

"Then you have to learn, or your life will become insufferable very quickly."

Cathy broke down, unable to hold it in any longer. She expected a savage verbal attack, but instead felt a gentle hand on her shoulder.

"I can see how hard this is for you," she said, speaking softly, "and I'm not without sympathy. But I know there are plans for my son, and he will need your total support. Don't make his life more difficult. He's a kind, loving boy and, if you let him, he'll be kind to you."

5

Max leaned heavily on the walking stick, doing his best to ignore the terrible aching in his back as he held his position on the other side of the spy-hole. Petra sat beside him, ear pressed to the wall, making notes. Occasionally she shook her head at Mr Ekstrand's attempts to be sociable with the Master of Ceremonies in the living room on the other side of the wall.

Lavandula had come straight from his niece's wedding and had been full of details about it for the first cup of tea. Uninterested, Max picked up on the gargoyle's occasional bouts of laughter on the other side of the house. He hadn't realised *Wuthering Heights* was a comedy. Its foul mood at being unable to help the tainted seemed to have lifted once it realised there was nothing to be done for them without the Chapter to take them in and care for them. If the Chapter was still intact they would have been given a new life, becoming researchers and staff to support the Arbiters. Now they were doomed to be slaves of the Fae, forever.

"I should imagine that Londinium is quite different without the Rosas," Ekstrand said, bringing Max's attention fully back to the conversation.

"Yes, all scrabbling to decide who'll be the next Duke, no doubt," Mr Lavandula said. He was dressed in an oyster-coloured satin jacket and breeches and a lavender-blue waistcoat embroidered with silver and pearls. "Though, between you and me, dear Ekkie, I don't think things will change too radically. I wouldn't be surprised if the Rosas remain in control of the domain one way or another."

“But the Rosas must have suffered once their actions were discovered?”

“Oh, yes, the Agency rounded them up quite dramatically.”

Agency? Petra mouthed to Max. He shrugged. For a moment he thought of the Judd Street talent agency that had snared those blondes. But that was connected to the Rosas, a front for their business interests and a means to lure in the right kind of innocents, not an organisation that would round them up.

“The ones they could find,” Lavandula said. “That’s the thing about the Rose, pull it up in one corner of the garden and you’ll find it springing up somewhere else. The family is just the same. They have deep roots beneath the surface all over Londinium, nay, all of Albion. Apart from Aquae Sulis, of course.” He sniffed, lifting a lace-edged handkerchief to his face to frame his smile. “My sister and I are certain of that.”

“Won’t the Agency have a means to find them? Your people have Charms for that very purpose.”

“The Rosas have wealth; they can afford the very best means of hiding. Mark my words, my sorcerous friend, we have not seen the last of them.”

“I suppose you aren’t concerned about what happens in Londinium.” Ekstrand poured more tea.

“Oh, I’m more interested than I used to be. My favourite niece has taken up residence there—the one who helped you to find me—so I’ve made it my business to find a little Londinium bird or two. In fact, just today I heard one of the minor Ranunculus family sons fell foul of an Arbiter in Hampstead. How embarrassing. Tell me, how is your broken Arbiter? Recovering well?”

“Yes,” Ekstrand said with a nod, handing over a refilled cup. “It’s good to know the Sorcerer of Essex is keeping London safe.”

“Mmm.” Lavandula sipped his tea. “It’s certainly good to know that the hapless Buttercups are as harmless as they ever were. And may I congratulate you on the delicious drama you effected upon my return; it quite distracted those at the ball from my…condition. Why, not a soul has commented upon the fact my cravat was missing, nor the state of my clothing and general struggle to be conscious, let alone erudite. They were all looking at you being so magnificent. It was so thoughtful of you, Ekkie dear.”

Ekstrand made an attempt to smile graciously. “I’m glad you’re recovering so well.”

“Indeed. Now, if you’ll excuse me, seeing as we’re all caught up and can put that terrible business behind us, I need to get back to putting the Season in order again.” Lavandula finished his tea and set the cup and saucer down gently. He stood and held out his hand to Ekstrand. “I do appreciate the understanding we have. It puts the other cities to shame. Why no one else has such an understanding in their domains I have no idea.”

“Perhaps they have more to hide,” Ekstrand suggested.

“Perhaps the other Sorcerers aren’t as charming as you.” Lavandula patted the top of Ekstrand’s hand as they shook. “Axon will see me out, ta-ta!”

“Taddles!” Ekstrand waved awkwardly.

Max waited for the front door to shut before following Petra into the room they’d been spying on. Ekstrand was flopped in his armchair, exhausted. At the sound of them entering, he opened one eye and looked at his librarian.

“You did very well, Mr Ekstrand,” she said, helping Max sit comfortably. “Just one thing: it’s ‘toodles’, not ‘taddles’.”

“I thought it was toodle-pip or not at all,” Ekstrand said. “It’s most confusing and by the end of our meetings I’m so tired.”

“But we have the information we need,” Max said. “The London Arbiters are still policing the other families, so it seems they had a deal with the Rosas in particular.”

“And we know the Roses have either been rounded up or are hiding,” Petra added. “Mr Ekstrand, do you know anything about this ‘Agency’ Lavandula mentioned?”

“Not a jot, and I’m not happy about it,” Ekstrand said, alert once again. “I knew I should have stayed to see what the Censor did with them. Maximilian, I want you to find out more about this Agency. If the puppets have developed a group to administer justice in the Nether, I want to know about it. And we need to interrogate a Rosa. If this Agency has them, we have to find it.”

“Or we could try and find one of the Rosas in hiding,” Max suggested.

“That may be less complicated,” Ekstrand replied. “I don’t want to get tangled up with an organisation I’ve only just heard about. Why has no one told me about this?”

Max spread his hands. “I think the puppet who helped us before should be approached. Sam said she knew more about Mundanus than they normally would. The puppets don’t usually let their daughters travel in Mundanus, or learn its ways. Only the wealthiest sons do that, from what I understand. I’m wondering if she has some insights into staying hidden. She may know more about this agency too.”

“Good idea. I’ll prepare an Opener, so she can come to us, and ask Lavandula to get it to her,” Ekstrand said. “He’ll enjoy the intrigue.”

Will unlocked the door of the penthouse apartment hoping their cases had already arrived and the champagne supper he'd arranged was waiting for them. Catherine hadn't said a word since they'd left the reception. He was glad that his father had arranged for a temporary Way straight to the building. If he'd had to sit in silence with her all the way from Bath to London it would have been unbearable.

"In Mundanus the groom carries the bride over the threshold," he said as he pushed the door open to the scent of fresh iris flowers.

"You don't need to do that."

"After you then."

The apartment was in the centre of London within walking distance of practically every famous landmark. He'd almost forgotten what the constant rumbling of a city's background noise was like, and the smell of the polluted air. The sound of sirens and car horns took him back to his Grand Tour. He looked forward to exploring the city again.

Catherine walked in with slumped shoulders, radiating misery. Will drew in a deep breath and readied himself for the challenge ahead.

He locked the front door against the rest of the world and followed his wife inside. She looked so different, it was hard to believe she was the same woman he'd struggled to talk to during the engagement. She still looked like Catherine, only…better.

The reception had passed without incident. The two Fae lords drew so much attention it made it easier to get through than for most couples. He'd worried that Catherine would have been incapable of polite conversation, and she did seem to take a long time to emerge after the talk with his mother, but she got through it well enough. He suspected she was too shell-shocked to cause any offence.

He watched her drift towards the living room, the crystals in the train of the dress sparkling under the bright modern lights. It had been pinned up into a cascading set of ruffles and the veil was still attached to her hair. He tried to imagine unhooking all of those tiny clasps later that evening and wondered what she was like beneath all of the layers of silk.

“It’s a nice place,” she said.

“I told you we’d honeymoon in Mundanus.”

“Honeymoon.” She shook her head.

“It doesn’t quite seem real, does it?”

“No, not even slightly.”

They reached the candle-lit living room, its walls covered in art. The servants had arranged the supper beautifully and would now be resting in the apartment below until they were needed again. Will was pleased to see his instructions had been carried out, and he checked his pocket watch as she looked at the paintings. Everything was on schedule.

“I thought the reception went well,” he said. She didn’t reply. “Champagne?”

“No. Thanks.”

“Do you mind if I do?”

“Go ahead.”

He twisted out the cork and it opened with a perfect sigh. Pouring into a single flute seemed a tragic act so he poured out a little for her and carried the glass over.

“Let’s toast the future, Catherine,” he said, holding it out to her.

“I said I didn’t want any.”

“Please. For me.”

She took the glass and he chinked it gently. “To our future. May we find success and happiness together.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Did they put a Charm on you to have unfailing optimism in the face of doom or something?”

He drained the glass. “I thought I’d make an effort. We can choose to be positive or drive each other mad. I hope you prefer the former.”

“What did you think when you heard about what they did to me?”

“You mean the Fidelity Charm?”

“‘Fidelity Charm’? Is that what they call it? Oh, the joy of euphemisms.”

“I was surprised. I thought about you. I knew you wouldn’t like it.”

“Do you agree with it?”

He took his empty glass back to the table, wanting a moment to gather his thoughts. “I can see why it’s done. Lord Iris is most particular when it comes to children, I suppose it’s a way to ensure they’re…of our blood.”

“I asked you if you agree with it, not why it’s done. I understand that perfectly.”

“I think it’s a rather harsh way to guarantee trust.”

“Yes, I had you down as one to seduce a woman into being compliant, rather than forcing her.”

He poured a larger glass of champagne. Catherine still hadn’t tasted hers. “I can see you’re angry. You’ve been furious about this from the very start and this certainly hasn’t helped.”

“You bet your life it hasn’t.”

“But I’m not the one who did this to you. And I’m not the one who forced you to marry me.”

“But you moved the date! My father said you wanted to marry sooner. That screwed everything up! Why did you do that?”

“Screwed what up?”

Then she downed the champagne.

“You were hoping to find a way out of it, weren’t you?”

She shrugged in a most petulant manner and he had to consciously remind himself to remain patient. He was certain there was a way to bring her round. He needed her more than she realised and more than he liked to admit.

“I pushed for the date to be changed to get you away from your father,” he replied, noting her surprise. “You didn’t think I’d see those bruises and do nothing, did you?”

“I was scared you were going to tell someone. When nothing happened I just…I don’t know, I thought you’d forgotten about it.”

“You think I’m that shallow? I was outraged. I would have gone and demanded an explanation from your father, had he been anyone else. But he and my father are close, and besides, it’s always best to make as few enemies as possible. I thought it better to remove you from the abuse by getting married sooner.”

She was scowling at him. “Why didn’t you talk to me about it?”

“I didn’t want to embarrass you.”

“So you just decided to rescue me instead.”

He shook his head. “You’re very difficult to please, you know.”

“I would like it if once, just once, a man would not decide what’s best for me without seeing how I feel about it first. Admit it, if it had been Oliver being beaten, you wouldn’t have just engineered his rescue.”

“It would have been much harder to marry him.” He had hoped to crack the ice with a light joke, but she didn’t appreciate it.

“The point is, it didn’t even occur to you that I might have an opinion. I was just a helpless girl.”

“Well, you were,” he said, shrugging. “Otherwise you wouldn’t have had the bruises. You just don’t like to admit that you needed help.”

She rolled her eyes but remained silent.

“Why did he beat you?”

“He was angry with me. It happened all the time when I was a child.”

“Why was he angry?”

She drained her glass. “None of your business.”

“Was it because you were late to the engagement ball?”

“That was Lord Poppy’s fault, not mine.”

“But something was wrong; my mother spotted it. Was it because of what Horatio was saying?”

He watched a red flush creeping up her neck. “No,” she said, but it was too late.

He had more questions but she was too defensive for him to get anything more out of her. He needed to put her at ease, then try to find out more. “There’s a supper here that needs to be eaten. Why don’t you come over and sit down? Let’s get to know each other. We’re going to be together for a very long time. Let’s at least try to become friends.”

“You just won’t give up, will you?” She still walked over, despite the sarcasm.

“I asked your family’s cook what your favourite foods are,” he said, moving a chair out for her. She pulled out her own and sat down. He sighed and sat in the one he’d chosen for her.

“That’s very thoughtful,” she said. “But miniature custard tarts?”

“Oh, that’s one of mine.” He smiled.

“Do you think that if you’re sweet enough to me, I’ll be easier to manage?”

He offered her the pâté, and when she refused he spread some on a slice of toast. “I’m hoping that if you see that I’m actually not a horrifically

awful chap, you might let me get to know you. And that, horror of horrors, you may also want to make a go of this."

"You don't want to get to know me. You want me to be pliable and bear your children."

"You won't give up either, will you?" He laid the knife down, took a bite. Perfection. "I think you're afraid you might like me."

"Oh please, stop, I might be sick."

"No, hear me out. If you actually started to like your husband, what would you have to push against? If you liked me you might actually start to like this life and you might have to accept all the parts you don't like about it, instead of rejecting it all in one convenient bundle."

"That's ridiculous." She stabbed a fork into a slice of ham and let it slap onto her plate.

She was pouting like his younger sister Sophia as she shovelled a spoonful of potato salad onto the ham, trying to ignore him. "Oh, Catherine, I know this isn't really you. Lucy told me."

"Told you what?" There was genuine fear in her eyes. Interesting.

"That you're a funny, bright and quite remarkable woman. That I should be patient with you."

"She said that?"

He nodded. "She took me to one side whilst I was waiting for you to finish with Mother." He regretted reminding her of that.

"About the Charm, William, can you lift it?"

"Why?"

"You said yourself it's harsh. I think it's barbaric."

"It can't be lifted. I'm sorry. And before you ask, I did check. I knew you would hate it. Only Lord Iris can undo the Charm in the wedding ring and, believe me, you do not want to make that case to him."

“Bastards, the lot of them,” she muttered.

He chose to ignore that. He watched her push the food around her plate, locked inside her own furious thoughts. She took herself too seriously to be prodded into shifting her outlook. He munched on the toast as he considered his next move.

“I had an unpleasant surprise this morning, before the wedding,” he said. “Father called me into his study and informed me that we’re to move to Londinium and I’m to take the Dukedom.”

“What?”

“That’s what I said.” He smiled. “The house is being prepared for us now. It will be ready by the end of the honeymoon. Do you mind missing the rest of the season in Aquae Sulis?”

She looked delighted. “Not at all!”

“It doesn’t mean we won’t have events to attend here, in fact, I anticipate we’ll be very busy indeed. With all the upheaval of losing the Rosas, I imagine the Londinium notables in Aquae Sulis will abandon the season to consolidate their interests here.”

“Hang on a minute,” she said with a frown. “The Dukedom? They want you to be in charge of the Court?”

He nodded. “I’m under a huge amount of pressure, Catherine. After what happened with the Master of Ceremonies, they’re expecting great things from me.”

“Regret taking all the credit now?”

He smirked. “Not at all. You didn’t seem to appreciate it.”

“I didn’t think you needed anything else to inflate your ego.”

“I didn’t neglect to mention your involvement with the Arbiter and the Sorcerer because I wanted all of the acclaim. I did it to save you the trouble of difficult questions and—”

“There you go again, saving me when I don’t need it.”

“Not just you, the Censor also. She was the one who sent you to help the Sorcerer, after all. I’m sure she wouldn’t have appreciated that being revealed to your family, or the rest of Aquae Sulis for that matter. It isn’t all about you, Catherine.”

She tapped the potato salad with the back of her spoon and was quiet for a few moments. “Hang on. If you become Duke, then I would be Duchess. You don’t have to go for the throne, do you?”

“Catherine, I’m not doing this because I feel like it. Lord Iris wants our family to take Londinium.”

“Aren’t you sick of everyone telling you what to do?”

He took another bite of toast and mulled the question over. “It seems to me that the higher up the ladder you climb, the fewer people can do that. Ultimately, we’ll never stop being…guided by our patrons, but look at the benefits we have in return. If I become Duke, we’ll have more freedom than ever. Wealth independent of the family for one thing, that’s significant. And control over property in a way that’s impossible in Aquae Sulis. They do things very differently here.”

“But do you actually *want* to be Duke?”

The question made him pause. He hadn’t even thought of it that way; all he’d considered was the difficulty of the task. “That’s irrelevant,” he said and her eyes widened.

“Holy crap, they’ve totally brainwashed you.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“You haven’t even thought about it that way, have you? They say jump and you say, ‘How high?’” She shook her head. “I don’t suppose you’ve heard that song.” She dumped the spoon and leaned forwards. “What I don’t understand is how you could travel all around the world, meet people—

mundane people—and see the most amazing things, then just come back and forget about it all!”

“I’ll never forget my Grand Tour, it was the best time I’ve ever had.” He didn’t want to admit how much he missed the Sicilian coast. He didn’t want to think about that woman, her laugh, and kissing away the tiny white circles of salt dried on her legs as the sun set.

“But didn’t it make you realise how much you’re missing now?”

He pulled his mind back to her and realised how strange a question it was. “That’s an odd way to see a Grand Tour. It isn’t a chance to see all the things denied us. It’s a chance to broaden our minds.”

“Oh, yes, but for men only, because women don’t have minds to broaden.”

“Ladies choose not to lose the first bloom of youth.”

“We don’t choose anything. Trust me.”

He sat back, aware that he was underprepared for her attitude. During their brief engagement she’d made it very clear she was unhappy about the match, but he hadn’t discovered the root of her dissatisfaction. She’d apologised for her bad manners, and then repeatedly destroyed every attempt to have a civil conversation. The only time they’d actually agreed on anything was when he had to distract the staff at the Rosas’ failed housewarming party so the Arbiter could enter the house unseen.

Memories of Horatio Gallica-Rosa’s accusations returned with renewed clarity. He’d said she’d been living in Mundanus instead of being polished up at a finishing school abroad. The evidence supporting Horatio’s claims certainly outweighed any of lessons in deportment.

“Didn’t your mother prepare you for this life in any way at all?” he finally asked.

“All she did was demonstrate how—” She cut herself off and sucked in a deep breath. “They did all they could, in their own way. It just didn’t…I just…I’m just…” She closed her eyes, looking very pale all of a sudden. “You’ll want me to impress people if you try for the Dukedom. I can’t do that. I’m no good at that kind of thing.”

He reached across to cover her hand with his. “I’ll do everything I can to help. We’ll bring in tutors, we’ll practice our dancing, I’ll coach you on how to deal with these soirées.”

She looked at him. “It won’t do any good. Look, we need to figure out a way to make your family accept that this is a poor match and…I don’t know, nullify the marriage or something.”

“Are you mad?”

“No, I’m serious, it’s the best solution for both of us. You can marry someone more suited to you and I can go and do what I want to do.”

“And what exactly is that?”

She stared at him and he could see she was weighing whether to tell him or not. “It’s not playing political games and pretending to be someone I’m not.”

Evidently she needed to trust him more than she did. He pulled his hand away. “You need to stop thinking like that. You don’t believe I can help you because you’ve never been helped.”

“I don’t want to be.”

He gritted his teeth. How was he supposed to take the Londinium throne with a petulant child of a wife? The way Lucy had talked about her made him think she’d actually been referring to another Catherine. He had to make the marriage work. If it failed it would cause a rift between their families in Aquae Sulis and make his chances of taking the throne even

more remote. The residents of Londinium would never respect a man who couldn't keep his wife.

"We just need to find a way to make life in the Nether more bearable for you," he said, trying to sound as light as he could. "It doesn't have to be as bad as it was with your family. In fact, I'll make a promise to you now that it won't be."

She just stared at the food.

"And I'd like you to promise me that if there's something about our life in the Nether that you find unbearable, you must tell me. Then we can improve it instead of letting it fester."

"What if it's everything about life in the Nether?"

"Well…then we'll address each concern one at a time until you're happy. We have time, after all. Which reminds me…"

He plucked out the pocket watch. Two minutes to go. He stood up and gently pulled her to her feet. "I arranged a surprise for you."

He guided her to the balcony. There was a blast of cold air as he opened the French doors. The Thames was a black ribbon glimpsed between buildings, the night-time city ablaze with electric lights and the thrum of urban life. He took off his jacket and placed it around her shoulders, then closed the doors behind them so it would be warm inside afterwards.

"It's an amazing view," she said.

"That's not what I arranged," he said, as the first rocket shot up into the sky and exploded into a ball of blue light.

"Fireworks!" Enraptured, Catherine was quite transformed and he realised how tense and defensive she usually was. Her thrilled exuberance actually made her quite attractive. Then he was caught up in the display, having only seen a handful on his Grand Tour.

"That was so brilliant!" she cheered at the end of the grand finale.

“Wasn’t it?” He turned her face towards him and kissed her.

She moved away so fast she banged the back of her head on the glass of the French doors. “What did you do that for?”

“I can kiss my own wife, can’t I?”

“Don’t do that again.” She scrabbled for the door handle and then dived back inside the flat.

Will’s euphoric mood collapsed. Catherine pulled at the clips holding the veil in place as she stamped away from the doors, his jacket falling from her shoulders.

When he stepped back inside, the air felt oppressively warm. “Catherine,” he called as she headed for the door. “What’s wrong? Didn’t you like the fireworks?”

She was scrunching the veil in her hands nervously. “They were wonderful. Why did you have to spoil it?”

“How can kissing you be called spoiling it? I wanted to because you looked beautiful and the moment was perfect. Do I have to explain?”

“Did you think I’d be so dazzled by the fireworks that I’d just melt in your arms?”

“I didn’t—”

“Because I’m not going to do that. I may as well tell you now I’m not going to let you sleep with me.”

He blinked. “I beg your pardon?”

“I know you’re expecting it, but I think that would be wrong.”

“How can it be wrong for a marriage to be consummated on the conjugal night?”

She threw the veil over the back of a nearby chair. “Look, I know this might be hard for you to grasp, but having sex with someone I barely know —and didn’t want to marry—is not something I want to experience.”

“But it’s—”

“In fact, I think it’s shocking that they put a Fidelity Charm on me to stop me running off and shagging the first man I meet, yet expect me to leap into bed with a man I barely know just because we said some words in front of a tree.”

“You swore an oath to have my children. That will be very difficult if we don’t share a bed.”

“I swore that under duress. It doesn’t count. And if you try to force me—”

He held up a hand. “I don’t think you realise how lucky you are. Most men wouldn’t listen to your feelings on the matter, and certainly wouldn’t entertain a conversation with you on the subject.”

“I’m not going to thank you for not raping me yet.”

His fingernails dug into his palms as he struggled to contain his anger. “It wouldn’t be rape. This is one of the most fundamental duties you have as my wife.”

“What I choose to do with my body is up to me. I don’t want to have sex with you, therefore if you try to force me it’s rape, regardless of whether you’re my husband. It’s against the law for you to—”

“What law?” he demanded.

“In Mundanus it’s—”

“Their laws don’t apply to us!”

“I’m not just going to lie back and think of Albion!” she yelled, moving to put the table between them.

“How dare you force me into being monstrous just to take what is my right to have!” Will gripped the back of the chair in front of him, seething. This wasn’t how it was supposed to be, not how he planned it at all. He must have been the first man in Society to be faced with such an unbearably

difficult wife. “It’s my duty as much as yours,” he said, trying to sound calm again. “The first child is a critical milestone. They’ll want to see you pregnant as soon as possible. If you refuse, you place me in an impossible position.”

“Sorry.” She folded her arms. “You’ll just have to deal with it.”

“No, *you* will.” He took a step towards her, but the way she flinched made him pause. What was she turning him into? This wasn’t the kind of husband he wanted to be. He shut his eyes, not able to look at her a moment longer. “You need to give your attitude some serious thought,” he said, picking up his jacket from the floor, desperate to get out of the apartment and away from the way she was making him feel. “I’m not going to wait forever.”

6

A muscle near Sam's eye twitched as Poppy stared at the five poor bastards he'd dragged back into Exilium. They were barely able to stand, their legs spattered with dried mud spots from the motorway, their hair lank and messy.

"Well…I suppose I could find a use for them. If they were cleaned up and dressed properly…"

"And given some food and something to drink, for Christ's sake." Sam was losing his patience.

"And if you're willing to give me something in return."

Sam knew that was coming a mile off. "Yes, if they'll be cared for and treated well."

Poppy's smile was broad and reminded Sam of an alligator eyeing up a lone water buffalo. "Let's see…there are five little waifs so I would ask for an utterly trivial five years of your life. One for each."

Sam clenched his fists. Clare was staring at him.

"It's such a generous offer," Poppy said. "Take this poor thing." He grabbed Clare's wrist and pulled her away from the others. She started to shake. "I'll have to feed and clothe her, give her somewhere safe to sleep—mundanes have so many needs—for eternity. Only one year of your life is a trifling amount in comparison, wouldn't you agree?"

Sam looked into her eyes. She was more than terrified, she was angry and blaming him for the latest indignity they were being subjected to. Five years off his life wasn't so bad. It would be easier to avoid some of the

creeping misery of old age than the guilt of failing to make a deal to save them. His grandmother struggled for years with arthritis and the slow decline of dementia. Maybe it would be a blessing in disguise.

“Deal.”

“Wonderful!” Poppy plucked a flower from those clustered about his feet and blew across its petals, sending a shower of sparkles deeper into the trees of his domain. “Follow them, little slaves. There will be food and pools of deep water for you to frolic in.” He watched them leave and called, “I expect to see frolicking of the highest order when I arrive!”

“I’m going.” Sam needed to be in a pub. He needed to be so drunk he couldn’t remember what he’d done.

“Before you do, would you be so kind as to go and pick three blades of grass for me from over there?” Poppy pointed down the path out of the clearing.

“Why?”

“Please? It won’t take you very long.”

Sam set off. If a piano was going to fall out of the sky as he picked it, or the Lord of Grass turn up and demand his belly-button for payment or some other Fae crap, he just wanted to get it out of the way.

He returned with the grass held between thumb and forefinger and held it out to Poppy.

“How long did that take?” Poppy asked and before Sam could reply the faerie spoke from a little way away. Sam hadn’t even noticed it was there.

“Four minutes,” it replied and Sam followed the voice to spot it amongst the trees, sitting on an hourglass ten times its size. The sand seemed to be frozen mid-flow.

“So how many are left?”

“Ooooh, lots.”

“How many exactly?”

It looked surprised by Poppy’s question. “Exactly…in numbers?” When Poppy nodded it looked up for a few moments and then said “Two million, six hundred and twenty seven thousand, nine hundred and ninety six.” It wrinkled its nose and coughed. “Urgh. Mathematics tastes horrid.”

“Goodness.” Poppy turned back to Sam. “When it’s broken into the tiny bits you seem to value, five years sounds like much more time.”

Sam realised what the hourglass represented. “Now just hang on one fucking minute—you mean I have to do whatever you want for a total of five years?”

“Yes.” Poppy twisted his cane with a horribly smug look on his face.

“Not five years off the end of my life?”

Poppy frowned. “Goodness, no. Why ever would I want your worst years? Or did you think you would die earlier? Oh! What a fascinating misunderstanding. You were willing to die sooner for those waifs? How noble.”

Sam pinched the skin between his eyebrows to stave off the headache spreading across his skull.

“Not all at once,” Poppy said. “Every now and again. Half an hour here, five minutes there.”

“That’s it, I’m going,” Sam said. “Fuck this. Fuck all of it.”

“See you soon!” Poppy called.

Sam raised his middle finger and held it aloft as he left the clearing. Thankfully, it seemed the Fae didn’t know what it meant.

When Cathy was certain Will wasn’t coming back straightaway, she went

into the bedroom and freed herself from the wedding dress. She ended up ripping some of the seams as she couldn’t reach all of the tiny buttons at the back but the sound of the fabric tearing was wonderfully cathartic. When the dress was nothing but a pool of beaded silk around her feet she jumped up and down on it a few times and then kicked it across the room until she realised how childish she was being. The tears started.

She let them fall as she unlaced the corset and peeled off the stockings. She brushed her fingertips over the red marks the corset’s bones had left in her skin and remembered the new curse they’d put on her. The one her father had placed on her had been removed that morning and she only knew that because she’d overheard a brief and cryptic exchange between her parents during the reception. She’d been curse-free for less than an hour.

An experimental tug on the wedding ring confirmed her suspicion; it fit too snugly for her to pull it off easily. She considered experimenting with soap and cold water but knew it wouldn’t work.

She needed clothes in the mundane fashion and she needed to get out and walk. Cathy wiped the tears off her cheeks and pulled a couple of jewels from her hair as she looked at the wall of fitted wardrobes. The sound of a police siren going past the window reminded her that she was in Mundanus and it cheered her. Getting out of the Nether was half of the battle.

The food had been laid out before they arrived so she suspected the Iris machine would have selected clothes for her honeymoon, had them brought to the flat and unpacked at the same time. She opened the first door she came to and found dresses hanging with matching shoes beneath. She rummaged in drawers and found underwear but no jeans or sloppy tops of the kind she would prefer. The Irises didn’t want her to wear trousers. They probably thought it was indecent.

“Fucking Irises,” she muttered as she pulled on knickers made to delight a husband rather than be comfortable and a lacy bra that would itch like crazy. “Fucking Fae bastards,” she added as she laddered a new pair of stockings and then abandoned them.

She pulled out the most comfortable-looking dress, even though it was one she would never pick out for herself, and put it on. It was too neat, too floral and far too feminine for her taste. When she looked in the mirror she felt sick at the sight of herself as the perfect little wife in the perfect little dress. “Fuck all of you,” she said to the reflection, and went hunting for a clock.

She missed her wristwatch. In the Nether men had pocket-watches and the ladies relied on the clocks around the house and the punctuality of the staff to run their day. Thankfully the electric oven in the mundane kitchen had one. It was almost half past six in the evening, the darkness outside in keeping with the Novembers she remembered from her time at university. So many people moaned when the winter nights lengthened but she loved them as much as the days. Simply the change from light to dark and back again filled her with a gentle delight. Living in the constant twilight of the Nether was unnatural in the extreme. She had to get out and see the electric lights of the city and feel the fresh air on her face again. But she needed a plan too.

The table was still covered with food and, now that William had left, her appetite was returning. She unfolded a napkin and put in a few dainty sandwiches and tartlets that would travel better than the rest of the fare. Then she considered where to go first as she ate a boiled egg and the potato salad.

She needed access to the internet and her bank account. That would give her control over her mundane affairs again and make sure everything was

ticking over until she could return. To do that she needed to call her friend Tanya and get her tech sent, as she'd arranged before Tom had taken her back to Aquae Sulis, so she needed a phone. She wanted her old phone back as that was the number she'd given Sam, and the one Josh knew.

Then she needed to go to the Emporium of Things in Between and Besides and see if the Shopkeeper could help. What exactly she wanted help with wasn't fully formed in her mind yet, but she planned to think about that as she walked. Tech first, magic second; he would be there until late anyway.

Before she'd left Manchester she'd memorised Tanya's number so all she needed was a public payphone. And cash.

"Shit."

She didn't have her bank cards—they were with the package left in her friend's care. The Shopkeeper didn't allow coins in his shop and he didn't keep paper money on the premises either.

Cathy thought about the way everything had been arranged in the flat. If the Iris servants had unpacked everything needed for a honeymoon in Mundanus, surely they would have left money somewhere?

She went back into the bedroom and looked in one of the bedside drawers. It contained a small bottle of scent and a neat pile of lace-edged handkerchiefs. So that was supposed to be her side of the bed. She dashed to the matching set of drawers on the other side and found a spare set of keys—presumably to the flat—an *A to Z* of London and a wallet. Jackpot.

There was a thick wad of notes inside; after a cursory flip through them she estimated there was over three thousand pounds in fifty-pound notes. She plucked two notes from the middle and dropped the wallet back in the drawer, then grabbed the keys and the *A to Z*.

A smart black winter coat was hanging on a stand near the door and fitted perfectly. It was belted, with too few pockets and no hood, but it did have an inside pocket in which she could secrete the notes and keys. One of the outer pockets was just big enough to hold the napkin of food. She didn't care about how the bulge looked.

She tested the keys first and once she'd identified the front-door key she left. In the lift down to the ground floor she wondered if she should have left a letter. If William returned to find his new possession gone, would a brief note saying "Gone out. P.S. You can shove this marriage up Lord Iris's arse!" make it better? Did the Fae even have—

"Focus," she said to herself, aware that her hands were shaking. It was the first time she'd been free to go where she pleased for weeks. Since Tom had dragged her back to Aquae Sulis she'd either been locked in her room, chaperoned or doing something secret, dodgy and stressful for the Sorcerer.

Cathy left the building and for a moment all she could do was stand on the pavement and take in the streetlights and cars, the crowds of people and the breeze on her face. She was filled with euphoria and renewed optimism. It took a minute to work out exactly where she was and that Covent Garden was just a short walk away. There would be shops there, and phones, once she had change.

Just walking down the street alone was exhilarating. People passed without giving her a glance and she revelled in true anonymity. No one was watching for her next mistake, no one cared about what she was wearing or how disappointing her face was. They were all just getting on with their own business. This was the world she wanted to live in.

A newsagent's caught her eye and a sudden craving for chocolate hit her. She went inside and glanced around for the sweets section, only to see Josh's face on several magazine covers.

Everything else greyed out as she headed for the nearest one and pulled it off the shelf. “What is Josh’s secret?” was in huge letters underneath a picture of him in big sunglasses, caught mid-stride. “Serial monogamist leaves broken hearts in his wake, more on page 4,” said the strap line underneath. Cathy flipped to the page to see a variety of shots featuring Josh and the redhead who’d knocked him down in Manchester and other women, all skinny and fashionably beautiful. She couldn’t take in the text, her attention made scattershot by the shock of seeing him dressed so differently, his hair messy in a horribly trendy way instead of the hopeless geeky mess she remembered.

She stuffed the magazine behind another and picked up a second one, which gleefully described the latest cat-fight caused by two glamour models apparently quarrelling over whom he liked the most. A third speculated about a broken engagement between him and the redhead and a fourth suggested he was about to marry a brunette who looked like she’d eaten nothing but celery for the last decade. They were really all describing the same phenomenon in varying levels of sensationalist language: Josh was having no trouble whatsoever finding rich and beautiful women who wanted to be his girlfriend. And it was all her fault.

“Are you gonna buy one of those or just crease ’em all?” the bloke behind the counter asked.

She looked at him, still unable to form a coherent thought.

“I wanted chocolate,” she finally said.

“Looks like you need more than that, love. D’you need to sit down?” She nodded. He pointed at the door. “There’s a café across the road.”

She put the magazine back on the shelf and grabbed a couple of bars of chocolate to take to the till. When she handed over a fifty, he didn’t take it. “You not got anything smaller?”

“No, sorry, I need change to make a phone call.”

“There’s a mobile phone shop next door, get a pay-as-you-go, save us all some trouble.”

She abandoned the chocolate, desperate to get away from the reminders of her botched wish, and did as he suggested. Twenty minutes later she had a phone and had abandoned the plan to call her friend until she knew her new address in London.

The café was her next stop and in minutes she was sitting down with a steaming hot chocolate in front of her. She was still shaken by Josh’s fame and wondered if he was really as happy as the magazines suggested. The magazine coverage didn’t fit with the Josh she knew. Did all those beautiful women love sci-fi films and books like he did? Had he opened up to them in the way he’d opened up to her? And what about his course? The pictures gave the impression of him being a London playboy—had he abandoned Manchester altogether?

Cathy stared at the new phone on the table in front of her. She knew his mobile number off by heart. She even picked it up, thumb poised over the keys, but she kept stopping herself. What would she say? And she still hadn’t found a way to stay hidden yet, or protect him from the repercussions of her flight.

And there was the new curse. When she was with Josh her father’s curse had made it impossible for her to undress near him. Now the Iris curse would make it impossible for them to even hold hands. Or kiss.

Just let him go.

The thought cut through the emotional mess and filled her with a sense of relief. Josh had moved on. Of course he had, why wouldn’t he, especially with all those women to choose from? He probably didn’t even remember

her, and if he did it was probably the awful things she said to him just before that stupid wish.

The relationship she had with Josh had to be re-framed as something wonderful she once had but was now over, instead of something that was waiting to be rekindled if she could navigate the various obstacles between them. Besides, he'd be better off without her.

Cathy cupped her hands around the mug and blew across the top, watching the ripples on the surface of the hot chocolate. Hankering for an old love wasn't going to do her any good. She needed to focus on what she could do right now and what she could work towards whilst finding a route out.

She'd been so busy thinking about getting out and finding Josh that she'd lost sight of why she ran away in the first place. She didn't engineer an escape from life in the Nether so she could watch films, read comics and snuggle on the sofa with a fellow geek. And it wasn't just to find freedom—even though that was a big part of it. No, she'd wanted to find a way to make the best use of her mind, the best way to fulfil the potential that Miss Rainer's lessons had unlocked. The dreams of standing up for those without a voice and making all the difference to their lives had been lost in the panic and the upset and the wrench back into the Nether. There was no way she was going to sit around like bloody Rapunzel hoping that someone would come along and carry her off into Mundanus to resume her studies and pass all those exams. She already knew the mundane path towards fulfilment, impossible in the Nether with all the interference of the Fae and the patriarchal death-grip of the Patroons. It was just a matter of pursuing it.

The wedding ring chinked against the cup and reminded her of the marriage. Short of chopping her own finger off she couldn't remove it and the curse was offensive as hell but neither stopped her from resuming her

studies. Would Will stop her if he knew what she wanted to do? She didn’t know him well enough to predict whether it would be safe to tell him. He’d helped at the party in Aquae Sulis, when she really needed an ally, but that was to save her uncle. Caution was probably the best option whilst she got to know him.

Cathy rose from the table with her body warmed by the hot chocolate and her spirit filled with a renewed sense of purpose. It was time to call Tanya and get the tools she needed for her studies again, call Sam with her new number and then visit the Emporium to see if she could resume her deal with the Shopkeeper. Anything was better than moping about, mourning a relationship that was long gone.

7

Cornelius Alba-Rosa took the stairs two at a time. He knocked on his sister’s bedroom door, two quick raps then two slow ones.

“Come in,” Amelia called.

She was seated at the dressing table, wearing one of her favourite dusky-pink brocade gowns, her dark-brown hair arranged in the style of a classical Greek beauty. Jewellery was strewn on the table and she was holding up a necklace against her throat.

“Hello, darling,” she said. When she saw his reflection she twisted round, dropping the necklace into her lap. “What is it?”

“The Agency found Uncle Alfred.”

She struggled not to weep. “How?”

“They intercepted a message, bribed a servant, I don’t know. But that’s the third Rosa in two days. I’m starting to wonder whether they’re spying on us. I know Uncle Alfred was in touch with the others who were caught. I told my contact to stay away for at least two weeks, just in case any messages we send out lead them to Father.”

“It makes sense. I had no idea they’d be so thorough.”

“I think our enemies are putting pressure on the Agency to round everyone up,” Cornelius said. “They’re all too happy to get behind the Lavandulas’ outrage.”

“Even though most of them hate that family,” Amelia said.

“Not as much as they hated ours, it seems,” Cornelius replied, aware that he was dawdling his way towards delivering the rest of the news.

“If anyone knows how to benefit from disaster, it’s the weasels in the Londinium Court,” Amelia said, no doubt thinking of all the people they’d once dined and danced with, now gloating over their fall.

“There’s something else.” He came closer. “Someone tipped the Agency off about my business in Judd Street. They’ve seized the assets.”

“Can they do that, even if we’ve been taken in by William?”

“Seems they can. William didn’t know about the company, so he couldn’t protect it. Even if he could, it would pass into his name, just like this house.” He watched the flutter of her eyelashes as she blinked away tears.

“It could be worse,” she said. “We could have been taken like everyone else. Better for us to live under William’s protection than be subjected to that life.”

“Is it?” he muttered, and then regretted it. “No, you’re right, of course it is.”

Amelia looked down at the jewels in her lap. “I was trying to decide which necklaces to keep and which ones to set aside, just in case.”

He sat on the edge of the bed and rested his head in his hands. “I’m so sorry, Amelia.”

“It’s not your fault. Is that the last of your assets seized?”

“Yes. I’m officially penniless and homeless.”

“Not homeless, darling—we’re still in this house, aren’t we?”

He tried to smile for her, but if he’d been alone he’d have been tempted to weep. He’d come close several times when lying awake in the silent house, wondering what had happened to their mother. The Agency had taken her from a dinner party in Grosvenor Square, dressed in a fine gown and diamonds. He’d heard whispers of what they did to the women, and his

fists clenched at the thought of any of those Agency dogs laying a finger on her.

Amelia was putting on a brave face but their situation was dire. It was within William's rights to revoke his protection and turf them out onto the street on a whim, and for the first time Cornelius knew what it was to be helpless.

"Has William been in touch?" she asked.

"No, I've been dealing with his father's secretary regarding the house and the replacement of the staff."

She leaned towards him and lowered her voice. "I don't trust these Iris servants."

"Neither do I," he whispered back.

Even though they were still living in the house they'd known for years, having strangers attending to their needs was incredibly unsettling. Amelia was losing weight and neither of them had slept well since the night the Sorcerer destroyed their lives. With William's help. He couldn't forget that either.

"He's getting married today," she said, fingering the diamonds. "I heard the maids gossiping about it."

"I don't envy him having to marry that Papaver girl. She was awful."

"I don't suppose I'll ever see that Oak now," Amelia said, a tremble in her voice.

"One never knows what the future will bring." He knelt in front of her and took her hands in his. Even though he smiled and kissed the soft skin on the back of her hands, he knew she was right. She was an outcast now, and they both knew her fate.

"Still, I suppose being a mistress is better than the alternative." She was trying so hard to be strong for him.

“You weren’t born to be a mistress,” he said, the anger building in his chest. “You’re too good for that. You should be Duchess of Londinium, as Mother said you would be.”

“It’s inevitable though, isn’t it?”

He pressed a finger to her lips. His only sister, the one person in the world he trusted completely, buying their limited freedom with her flesh: that was not something he wanted to talk about.

“I’ll find a way out of this,” he said. “I promise. When all the fuss dies down and Society has a new family to destroy, our allies will come to the surface, I’m sure of it.”

“We don’t have any. If we did, they would have saved Mother.”

“They didn’t have the chance. If Father is managing to stay free, he’s got to have someone helping him. He’s just waiting until it’s safe to make contact; that’s what Uncle Alfred said and I believe it.”

“But look what happened to him.”

“We’re not in the same boat. Besides, our uncle was hardly the sharpest thorn on the stem, was he?”

“I suppose we have a little time.” Amelia kissed his hands back. “William will be away on honeymoon, and then there’s the rest of the Season in Aquae Sulis. He won’t have time to come here.”

“That’s right,” Cornelius said as cheerily as he could manage.

“Do you think he believed Horatio?”

Cornelius silently cursed the Gallica-Rosa for the hundredth time. The way he’d tried to drag him and Amelia down with him had been unforgivable. He’d wondered the same as her in the days since the debacle, and hadn’t come to a firm conclusion. It was possible William believed the claim that he and Amelia had been manipulating him, and still took them in

anyway so that he could take Amelia as a mistress. But would a man as capable as William disregard such a betrayal just for guaranteed bedsport?

He looked at his sister, the beauty of Londinium, and suspected that William would. And his own life had probably been saved in order to secure her trust and gratitude. It made the bile rise up his gullet.

“If you can, you need to find out what he thinks,” he said. “We need to keep him on side.”

“I know,” she said. “I’ll do whatever it takes.”

He pulled her into an embrace so she didn’t see his face twist in disgust. He needed to work out whom he could trust and how the Agency was spying on them. Then he could get a message to his father. If his contact was to be believed, even the most powerful Letterboxer Charms could be intercepted.

The front door slammed and the gentle boom reverberated up the stairs. They exchanged a worried glance, knowing that no one was expected for the evening and their residence was firmly off the social circuit now.

“Not the Agency?” Amelia asked as he let her go and stood up.

“Who else could it be?” He put a hand on his sword.

She dropped the necklace down the front of her bodice, scooped up the jewels, crammed them into the jewellery box and shut the lid as footsteps came up the stairs and down the corridor towards her room.

“I won’t let them take you,” he said, drawing the steel an inch, readying the Charm he’d bought with the diamond cravat pin he’d worn at the last ball.

There was a knock on the door. He dropped the sword back into place, looking at Amelia. The Agency wouldn’t be so polite.

“Amelia?” William called through the door. “Are you in there? May I come in?”

“Perhaps they didn’t marry,” she whispered and pointed at the wardrobe. “Quick!”

Cornelius darted over to it and got inside. He released the catch on the inner secret door that connected to his room before closing the wardrobe and losing the light.

“William?” Amelia called back. “Just a moment.”

Cornelius waited. He wanted to hear what the Iris had to say first-hand, rather than an abridged version next time he and Amelia were alone.

He heard the atomiser and then a moment later smelt the Charmed rosewater even through the wood. The bedroom door was opened and William came inside. Cornelius wondered how he looked and wished he’d left the door open a crack.

“What a lovely surprise,” Amelia said. “I thought it was your wedding day…you certainly appear to be dressed for it.” The bedroom door closed. “Is something wrong? Has—”

She was cut off, for a moment Cornelius wondered if something had frightened her, then he heard the gentle sound of a kiss ending.

“I had to see you,” William said. “I’ve missed you. Are you well? Are the servants to your liking? Do you have everything you need?”

“Yes, thank you,” Amelia said with a notable breathlessness. “But why are you here? Did the marriage not take place?”

“Oh, it happened,” William replied, accompanied by the sound of the bedsprings creaking as he sat on the bed. “But I just want to be with you. I want all of you, Amelia. Will you be my mistress? I swear I’ll provide for you and your brother, I’ll keep you both safe. I would have married you if I’d had a choice.”

“I’m hardly a desirable match now,” she said.

“I can’t think of a better word to describe you,” he murmured and they kissed again.

Cornelius battled the urge to burst out of his hiding place and throw William across the room. He buried his face in the silks of Amelia’s dresses as the kiss went on and on. Why wasn’t William with his wife, on tonight of all nights?

“You promise to keep Cornelius safe as well as you care for me?”

“Yes, I promise.”

“And you promise to let us live here, as we always have?”

“Yes. I didn’t want to take the deeds, Father insisted. Don’t see the house as mine; it’s your home, and Cornelius’s too.” He punctuated every two words with a kiss. Cornelius’s fingers twitched at the thought of throttling him.

“Then yes, William, I’m yours.”

Cornelius couldn’t listen any more. He pushed the secret door open and left his sister to her fate, with only silent promises of revenge to keep the rage in check.

Sam watched Cathy pale to the point when he wondered if she was going to faint—if that was even possible sitting down. “Oh, fuck.”

He took a long gulp of beer. She’d told him she’d been married off that day and narrowly avoided having to consummate a marriage to a man she hardly knew. For him to dump Lord Poppy’s message on top made him feel worse than shit. At least he’d been in London, on the way to see Leanne, when she’d called with her new number.

“Are you sure he said by the next new moon?”

“Yeah. It’s twenty-eight days. I checked.”

“Shit. I can’t paint.”

“I’m so sorry. I really thought I could save them.”

“It’s not your fault,” she said after what seemed like an eternity. “You didn’t exactly come away unscathed. How the hell did you get there without me or the Sorcerer?”

He told her about the strange tree and the faerie who’d found him there. She shook her head. “They were watching for you, maybe cast some magic to draw you in, maybe even put the idea in your head in the first place. It’s too much of a coincidence.”

“At least I can get to the edge of Exilium by myself.”

“You can?” She listened intently as he described the iron and copper pillar. “I have no idea what that’s about. Doesn’t change the fact Poppy has us both over a barrel. We are royally fucked here. There’s no other way to put it.”

Sam just nodded.

“Well…I suppose it puts this marriage into perspective,” Cathy said, picking up her beer. “It’s the last thing I’m worried about now.”

“Will you be OK? Can anyone help you? Can I do anything?”

She took several gulps and put the glass down. “Bloody hell, that’s gone straight to my head. No…I’ll think of something. There must be a Charm… I need to go.”

“Take care, Cathy, and I’m sorry.”

“Just keep in touch,” she said. “I’ll check for messages whenever I can. And Sam? Don’t try and be heroic again, OK?”

Sam finished his beer and then hers. It was time to go to the apartment and focus on the other thing he’d fucked up beyond recognition: his marriage.

He twisted his wedding ring as the lift to the fifteenth floor climbed. Free from the burden of passing on Poppy's message, he was now worrying about the call from his boss saying that he had to be in work at 8.30am on Monday with a damn good explanation for his repeated absences.

He was impressed by the building but a little intimidated. It was all shiny floors, glass and steel, the antithesis of their cosy Victorian terraced house in Bath. There was a concierge, which comforted him as he didn't like the thought of Leanne being alone in London. At least there was someone there to make sure dodgy people didn't come in.

The interior designers were too fond of metallic finishes for his taste. When he got to the door of the new apartment there were strips of burnished copper riveted to it in something they probably thought was an artful design. To him, it looked like a flattened basket with a warped horseshoe floating above it.

He hadn't really seen Leanne since they'd argued about her taking the job. He'd been pulled away from home by Ekstrand's interference and she'd been working all hours as usual. When she moved up to the flat it had been strangely insignificant as she'd only taken a couple of cases of clothes and left the house as it had always been. Sam wasn't happy about the move and the way she'd avoided any discussion about it but didn't feel he had the right to complain. That chance had passed and he had to adapt, otherwise their marriage would totally fall apart.

Even though she was expecting him, Sam's hand lingered just above the door. Should he pretend everything was fine or make it clear they needed to at least talk about the upheaval? Would she be cold and still angry with him about the way he'd ignored her calls whilst she'd been in Brussels? He couldn't explain to her the reasons behind his recent absences, any more than he could to his boss. Perhaps it was better just to move forwards, rather

than say anything that would prompt awkward questions he wouldn't be able to answer.

He finally knocked on the door and Leanne opened it quickly, having been informed of his arrival by the concierge.

"This is a surprise," she said, all smiles. "Couldn't wait?"

"What do you mean?" he asked and pecked her on the cheek she angled towards him. Hardly the passionate kiss of a couple who hadn't seen each other properly for what seemed like weeks.

"You were supposed to come tomorrow."

"I was? You mean it's Friday?"

She nodded. "You got the day off work?"

Now Sam understood why his boss had sounded so pissed off. He'd lost track of the days with all the trips to Exilium and missing a night's sleep. "I'm lucky you're home."

Just the hallway said "wealthy executive apartment" with its shiny wooden floor and tiny halogen spotlights. It smelt faintly of paint, and the skirting boards looked like they were made of the same burnished copper. It was definitely Leanne's territory and felt like a domestic annex to her professional life. It wasn't the kind of place he could imagine himself living in at all.

"Marcus and I were nearby so we thought we'd come back here for a debrief instead of going all the way back to the office so late in the day. He wanted to make sure the apartment was OK."

"Marcus is here?"

"Yeah, come through, I can't wait to show you the place."

Sam clenched his teeth and left his rucksack near the door. He hoped "debrief" wasn't as literal as he feared. "I can come back later, if you're working."

“Don’t be silly, we’re just about finished anyway. What do you think of the building? Amazing, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. Weird skirting boards though. I suppose it’s trendy or something.”

“Just wait till you see the view,” she said, her heels clipping on the floor as she went to the furthest door and opened it. “Come on.”

He closed the front door and followed her into a spacious open-plan living and dining room with the kitchen in the corner. Most of the wall in front of him was glass, allowing the panoramic view of the city to have the best impact.

“Wow,” he said after a few moments. “That’s cool.”

“Isn’t it beautiful? You can see the London Eye, the Houses of Parliament, and in the day it looks completely different again. I’ll never get bored of this view. Make yourself at home.” Leanne’s heels echoed in the large space. “I’ve just opened a bottle of wine, do you want some?”

Sam dropped onto the corner sofa. It was less squishy than he’d have liked. “Go on then.”

Leanne brought his glass of wine as he twisted the wedding band on his finger. He couldn’t stop thinking about the way Ekstrand had reacted to it when he first met him, the way it had seemed to burn the Thorn brother’s hand. He was certain it had also helped him to escape Exilium. The ring itself didn’t seem anything special to him though. Perhaps the forge it was made in had something to do with all the weird shit.

“Love, do you remember who recommended that forge where we made our wedding rings? I was trying to remember the other day—a friend of mine wants to do the same thing.”

“It was me.” Her boss entered from the hallway. Sam hoped he’d been in the bathroom, rather than the bedroom.

“Marcus, this is Sam, as you know. Sam, meet Marcus.”

Sam had only ever seen Neugent at a distance, usually in a car, or spoken to him on the telephone. Up close, he was struck by how old he looked: mid-fifties at least. There was more grey than blonde in his hair and the wrinkles around his eyes and mouth calmed Sam's primal competitive streak. His eyes were such an intense cobalt blue Sam wondered if they were contact lenses.

They shook hands. “It’s good to meet you properly at last, Sam,” Neugent said and Sam forced himself to smile, even though the sound of his voice set him on edge. It had been associated with whisking his wife away and ruining their plans for far too long to mean anything else to him now.

“Hello.”

“Yes, I used that forge for my own wedding.” Marcus smiled. Smug bastard. Sam wanted to punch him, then and there. “Much more romantic than something impersonal picked out of a jeweller’s window.”

“I didn’t realise you were married,” Sam said, spotting Neugent’s wedding ring.

“My wife passed away some years ago.”

“Oh.” Sam took a gulp of the wine to fill the awkward silence.

“Good journey?” Neugent asked, sitting in one of the stylish armchairs.

“Not bad,” Sam said, wondering when he was going to leave. The silence crept back like an unwanted dog.

“So I understand you’re a computer programmer,” Neugent eventually said.

“I code.” He shrugged. “Websites though, not computers, mostly database-driven sites and server side scripts.” He spoke quickly, hoping it would end the agonising small talk. He didn’t come to London to chat with his wife’s boss. Surely Neugent would realise he wasn’t welcome?

“Well,” Neugent said, standing up, “I’ll leave you both to it. Have a lovely weekend. Good to meet you properly Sam.”

“You too.”

“I’ll make sure I have those ideas for the Bolivian situation for you first thing on Monday morning,” Leanne said, escorting him out.

“The meeting is 8am sharp but there will be breakfast there,” Neugent replied. “Remember: don’t be intimidated by their sabre-rattling.”

“Don’t worry, it takes more than a few idiots with delusions of grandeur to bother me.”

Sam looked at his wife, taking in her slender legs, her high-heeled shoes, the way her hair was perfectly straight, and wondered who the fuck he was married to now. He remembered a time when she lived in combat trousers and Doc Martens boots, her hair wild with bright purple streaks, and curves his hands could really roam over. Now she was too skinny with too many sharp angles. The way she laughed with Neugent, high-pitched and brittle, was the opposite of the throaty roaring guffaw that used to burst out of her.

He hadn’t appreciated it as sharply as he did now, sitting in an apartment in which she looked right at home but which made him feel like an alien. This wasn’t who they were, or who they used to be. The thought of leaving the home they’d scrimped and saved to buy and patched up in their first year of marriage felt like a betrayal. But it was clear she’d already left all that far behind.

She came back to the doorway. “What?” she asked.

I’m wondering if there’s a marriage to save here, he thought. “Nothing,” he said.

Cathy made it to the tube station, found the right platform, got on the train and then burst into tears. She should have known Poppy wouldn't let her go without one last attempt to make her utterly miserable, but to ask for an Iris secret too? Even if she did unearth one, how could she possibly hide Poppy's task from her new family? They wouldn't want her to have anything to do with her former patron.

A man sitting across from her asked if she was all right and she mumbled something back to deflect attention, horrified she'd lost control in public. It was the beer, it had to be. Come on, she thought, hold it together. There was no one to turn to, no one to protect her from Poppy or Iris or even her own husband, so she had to pull herself together and come up with a plan.

It felt better out in the open air again. Cathy remembered the last time she'd walked to the anchor property for the Emporium of Things in Between and Besides in Cloth Fair. She didn't know then that Lord Poppy was already waiting for her and the memory of being led into his trap almost made her turn around. But the Shopkeeper had promised he hadn't betrayed her, and besides, there was no one else in the Worlds she could go to. The only other person who would even be capable of helping her to hide from the Irises was the Sorcerer of Wessex and she had no idea where in Aquae Sulis his house was, thanks to his extraordinary paranoia.

She recited the Charm as she knocked on the door, making it echo into the Nether reflection of the property. Her feet were throbbing; the stupid shoes provided for her honeymoon had slight heels and she wasn't used to walking miles in them. "My kingdom for my old trainers," she said with a sigh and rested her forehead against the door.

There was the familiar sound of a key turning twice in the lock and the door opened. She could see the Shopkeeper through the haze marking the

threshold between Mundanus and the Nether. His eyebrows shot up with surprise. “Catherine!” He beckoned her inside.

She took off her coat and hung it up before realising what she’d done. The Shopkeeper locked the door. As she’d hoped, the shop was shut to customers. “How are you?”

“I’m very well, thank you,” he replied, returning to his usual spot behind the glass counter. As always he was dressed in a bow-tie and tweed suit, his white hair neat. A different leather-bound book was on top of the counter but she couldn’t see the title on the spine. “And you?” He frowned at her. “Catherine…you’re wearing a dress. With flowers on it.”

She pulled a face. “I know. Things could be better. I…There are two things I wanted to ask you. First: do you have any Charms that could make me an artist?”

“Which medium would you like to work in?”

“Painting. And I have to be really, really good.” It was doubtful she could find a way back to her life in Mundanus before the painting was due.

“Do you paint or sketch already?”

“No.”

He pursed his lips. “I have various Charms that could help with certain skills but it sounds like you need everything…I do have a few things I could combine but there would be side-effects.”

“I don’t care, as long as I can paint.”

“I can give you a combined potion for an eye for colour, form and beauty, increased manual dexterity, improved concentration and a substantial boost to your raw creativity, but I can’t give you anything that will make you able to hold a brush correctly or make the best decisions in terms of subject and composition.”

“But I don’t have time to learn that.”

The Shopkeeper peered over the top of his glasses at her. “This isn’t just a new hobby, is it?”

Cathy shook her head. “It’s really important.”

“Well,” he said, pushing the glasses back up the bridge of his nose, “I have heard about a very rare Charm that can supposedly make one truly artistic but it has to be made to order. I take it from the way you’re looking at me you wish to place one?” When she nodded he went back to the counter. “It will take somewhere between three to four weeks. Do you still want the combined potions too?”

“Yes! I’ll take…ten of them.”

“Ten!”

“Well, they’ll run out, won’t they?”

“Each one will be effective for a number of hours. I wouldn’t recommended consuming more than one per year, otherwise—”

“It’s fine. Really. Ten. Charge them to my husband’s account, unless there’s something I need to pay myself?”

“You’re in credit, actually,” the Shopkeeper said, much to her surprise. “You overpaid me for the Luck Egg. A kiss of genuine gratitude and affection is worth a huge amount. They’re very rare.”

She almost kissed his cheek again, before remembering the curse. “I am genuinely grateful. Will it take you long to prepare the potions?”

“I’ll do it straightaway and Letterboxer them to you as soon as they’re finished. We’ll settle up for the Charm once it’s in. What was the second thing you wanted to ask?”

“I was hoping I could renegotiate with you, perhaps take my old job back and—”

“Wait a moment! I thought today was your wedding day. Am I mistaken?”

“No,” she said, holding up her left hand.

His lips matched the colour of his hair. “What in the Worlds are you doing here?” It was as close to a squawk as she’d ever heard out of his mouth. “Have you taken leave of your senses? Where is your husband?”

“I have absolutely no idea.”

“Does he know you’re here?”

“Of course not.”

He gawped at her. “What…why…what…”

“We had a row, he left and I—”

The Shopkeeper covered his ears. “I don’t want to know, Catherine, I mustn’t know, and I must ask that you leave, immediately!”

“Why?”

“Because I don’t want them to find you here once they start looking for you. Bad enough that Poppy tracked you down to my shop. If Iris did as well they would ask very difficult questions indeed.”

“But I don’t have anyone else I can ask! I don’t want to get you into trouble, but I wouldn’t have risked coming here unless I really needed to. And this isn’t any different to the time you helped me before.”

“Of course it is! You’re married now, Catherine, and not into just any family. Didn’t your parents prepare you? The Irises are ruthless in their pursuit of perfection, in all things. I have no idea what William Iris thinks he’s doing leaving you free to run away on your wedding night but I don’t want to be caught in the mess if it’s discovered.”

Cathy didn’t move. She couldn’t. Where was there to go but back to the honeymoon flat? She looked down at the floor, not wanting him to see the despair in her eyes.

“I’m sorry.” His voice was softer and she watched his shoes as he came out from behind the counter. “I genuinely want to help but I can’t take the

risk. And you can't either. You need to go back to…wherever you're supposed to be and hope that you get there before your husband discovers you've gone."

"I don't give a stuff if he knows."

"Catherine, listen to me. I once knew a young lady married into the Iris family and unhappy with her lot. She came to me for a sleeping Charm. I thought it was for her own use, but in fact she was using it to make her husband sleep as soon as he came to bed instead of fulfilling his—" he cleared his throat "—marital duty."

Cathy smiled at the thought of it, admiring the solution.

"They realised what she was doing," the Shopkeeper went on, his expression humourless.

"What happened?"

"They packed her off to the Agency and replaced her with a more obedient wife."

"Perhaps life with the Agency was preferable."

The look the Shopkeeper gave her turned Cathy's guts to water. "Oh no, Catherine. I can assure you, she has not improved her situation. Now go back to your husband before the same happens to you."

8

Will stroked Amelia’s back, breathing her sweet scent in deeply. She was nuzzled into his chest, the bed was soft and they were both warm and relaxed. He could feel her belly against his hip, her right leg draped over both of his, her breasts pressed against his side.

Her skin was divinely smooth and free of blemishes, her hair long with a slight curl having been freed from its elaborate pinning. He explored the curve of her waist, brushed his fingers down her hip as hers traced the line down to his belly-button.

Will planted a kiss on the top of her head. She tilted her face up and stretched to meet his lips with hers. Her nipples grazed his skin and, seized with a pulse of passion, he grasped her about the waist and rolled her on top of him so her breasts would be squeezed against his chest. She giggled and let her hair fall around their faces, forming a secret world in which only their kisses existed.

Gradually, the realisation that he couldn’t stay there all day as well as all night crept in and tarnished the gilded pleasure. This was how it should have been with his wife. He should have been tempted to tell Catherine that his plans for the day had changed and that they weren’t to leave the bedroom until their marital home was ready. Instead, he found himself dreading seeing her again.

“What is it?” Amelia asked. “Do you have to go?”

He wrapped both arms about her, pressing as much of her skin against him as he could, wanting to have her leave an impression in his flesh that he

could take with him. “Soon,” he whispered. “I don’t want to. But I should.”

“It is your honeymoon, I suppose,” she said, a twitch at the corner of her mouth waiting to break into a smile.

“Hardly,” he muttered. “I’d rather pretend it was ours.”

“I’m game,” she said. “Let’s pretend you’re being called away to a function at Black’s that you simply couldn’t get out of. Whilst you’re drinking cocktails, I’ll bathe in milk and honey, and while you play billiards I’ll wash my hair in rosewater.” She kissed his throat. “And as you play cards, I’ll brush my hair a hundred times with my sandalwood comb until it shines.” She kissed his chest. “Then I’ll come back to bed and warm it for you, so you can slip between the sheets.” She kissed his belly. “I’ll wrap myself around you and steal the chill from your skin.”

He pulled her back up to kiss his lips, trying to control his baser urges. “If I’m not careful, I’ll never leave.”

“I’ve always preferred a carefree man,” she said, smiling.

After a few moments locked together, he summoned all the willpower within him to slide her to the side and get out of the bed.

She pouted at him as he reached for his shirt. He was ashamed by the strewn clothing he’d have to reclaim and wear again. “I’m sorry, my love,” he said softly, watching her hand stretch across the sheets towards him. “I have to go.”

She heard the conviction and flopped onto her back, though even that was graceful. Her hair spilt across the pillows, she stretched, languid and the very epitome of temptation. As she stared up into the inside canopy of the bed, Will struggled into his underwear, embarrassed by the effect she still had on his body.

“I never thought I’d be a mistress,” she said as he pulled on his trousers. “I was taught how to be a wife in charge of a household and oiling the

wheels of Society for my husband's success."

He twisted round to face her. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be." She smiled, and he couldn't help but reflect it. "If I'd married, I never would have been with you and I wanted that, secretly."

"I wanted to be with you," he said. "I resented other people for taking my time, I kept waiting for when I could see you again. I never dreamt I'd have anything like this with you. I'm sorry you won't have the life you deserve, but the selfish part of me is glad we can have this."

He leaned across and kissed her again, then brushed his lips down her throat, skimming her breast until he reached a nipple and sucked it into his mouth. He felt her back arch as she gasped and cupped the other breast in his hand as he nibbled playfully. When he pulled back, her green eyes were bright with lust, her cheeks flushed and lips deep red. She grabbed at his collar but he pulled back before she could catch it, wagging a finger.

"You're a cruel man, William Iris," she said, pulling the sheet up to cover herself as he resumed his dressing. "You do that to me before you leave? Am I to assume you want me to do nothing but lust after you all day?"

"I would like nothing more," he said, truthfully. "I like the thought of you lying naked and restless under these sheets, needing me to return and quench that fire. I always knew something burned in you."

"And I you," she said. "We were meant to be together. Perhaps fate conspired on our behalf."

"Perhaps." He wondered why fate would be so unfair as to place Catherine in the role of wife.

Will did the best he could with the cravat, knowing he looked dishevelled and guilty of a night away from home. He ran his fingers through his hair in the hope of calming it into a neater tumble on the top,

and took a last look at her. She'd rolled onto her side, propped up on one elbow, the sheet clinging to her curves beautifully. Her eyes were coaxing him back into bed.

"No," he said, as firmly as he could. "I'll be back as soon as I can, I promise."

"When?"

"Soon."

He tried to leave, then kissed her once and forced himself to walk out of the room. When he shut the door, the rest of the world came crashing in: the guilt at not consummating the marriage, the worry over what Catherine was doing now and where they could go from here. He leaned against the door for a moment, wishing unreservedly that Amelia was his wife, that Cornelius was his brother and that Catherine was off living her strange life in her own strange way with someone else.

Sam dropped his keys onto the shelf in the hallway and slung his rucksack on the sofa. The house felt horribly empty and was lit only by the orange glow from the streetlights outside. He switched on the light and went to the fridge only to find lumpy milk and something unrecognisable that smelt awful. He rescued a lone tin of beer from underneath a rotting lettuce, poured its contents into a glass and leaned against the kitchen worktop.

He knew he had messages from work to pick up and emails to check but he just couldn't face them. He was probably going to get dragged over the coals by his boss in the morning and rightly so; his productivity and attendance had nosedived. He'd wanted to talk it over with Leanne but she'd been obsessed with showing him the sights. It was as if she was trying to sell him a lifestyle whilst keeping him at arm's length, and he hated the

way it felt. Every time he tried to have a proper conversation with her something came up. Either the bloody light started flashing on her Blackberry or it was time to get to the tube station to do the next “fun” thing on the list. He’d felt like a relative visiting, someone to keep busy and dazzle with success whilst ensuring there wasn’t enough time to have a meaningful conversation.

Sam rummaged in a drawer and pulled out a takeaway menu. There was a noise from the hallway and he assumed he’d not shut the front door properly. He took a menu with him to read as he went.

“Evenin’, Sam.”

Sam yelled. The gargoyle was standing in the middle of his hallway with Max behind him.

“Don’t you know how to use a bloody doorbell?”

“We came to make sure you’re not dead,” the gargoyle said in its smoker’s voice.

“Why would I be dead?”

“You disappeared,” Max said, reaching into a pocket and pulling out a small octagonal box. “After you went back to Exilium. I take it you took the tainted there?”

“I had no choice.”

“But you disappeared the day after. Has the puppet been in contact with you? Did she take you into the Nether?”

“What? Look, I didn’t disappear, I was in London. And what puppet?”

“Catherine,” the gargoyle replied.

Sam felt the churn of guilt again at the memory of her face when he passed on the message from Lord Poppy. But they had met in Mundanus. “I haven’t been in the Nether, I don’t know how to get there and anyway I don’t ever want to go there ever again.”

“You’re certain?” Max asked.

“Course I bloody am, it’s a bit hard to miss, isn’t it? Even I would notice if the sky turned silver and night never came.”

The gargoyle and Max looked at each other. “Something’s not right,” the gargoyle said.

“On Friday evening shortly after eight you went somewhere else, correct?” Max asked.

“Yes. I went somewhere else.”

“Where?” asked the gargoyle.

“None of your bloody business.”

“This is important, Sam,” Max continued. “You were taken somewhere outside Mundanus several times over the weekend and that shouldn’t be happening. Even though we’ve had dealings, as far as anyone else is concerned you’re an innocent. If someone has been taking you out of Mundanus that’s against the rules of the Treaty, so I have to investigate. You may not like it, but it’s my job.”

The Arbiter and gargoyle both looked out of place in his house and showed no signs of leaving. “Whatever your Sorcerer did to keep tabs on me must have something wrong with it,” he said. “I visited my wife’s new flat which is very definitely in London, not the Nether, and I would have noticed if it was because it has bloody great big windows that look over the city, OK?”

The gargoyle’s muzzle wrinkled. “Could’ve been a glamour, to make you think you were still there.”

“But we watched the telly. There were proper lights and a kettle that worked. So it couldn’t have been in the Nether. And I got a mobile phone signal there, for God’s sake, so just admit it, your Sorcerer is barking at the wrong postman.”

Max had wound up the little box in his hand, Sam expected it to open and show a tiny ballerina twirling to music. Instead, when Max held it out on his palm, the top opened and a tiny horn like that of a vintage doll's house gramophone emerged and turned slowly.

"Has your wife been acting any differently to usual?" Max asked.

Sam sighed. "Come into the front room. Can I at least get some food in? I'm starving."

He led Max and the gargoyle into the front room, hastily closed the curtains and then phoned through an order for sweet and sour chicken and rice.

Max was looking at him expectantly whilst the gargoyle was sniffing around the room like a bored bloodhound hopeful for some action. "You didn't answer my question about your wife."

"Leanne acting differently? Differently to what?"

"The usual."

Sam shrugged. "She's changed a lot since uni but I suppose that doesn't count."

The box and horn on the palm of Max's hand gave a gentle *ping* and he checked something on its side before closing it and returning it to one of his pockets. "Did something happen after university?"

"She got a job. We got married. Well, it was the other way round. We married right after we graduated." Maybe that was it, Sam thought. Maybe their parents had been right and they had married too young.

"Does she have the same job now?"

"She's a lot higher in the company." Sam folded his arms when he realised how far beyond his comfort zone he was. He didn't want to give anything more away. "Hang on, why are you asking me all this?"

"Has she lost weight?"

“Yeah. But she’s busy.”

“Does she wear different kinds of clothes to the ones she used to?”

The room felt cold. Sam shivered and closed the door to the hallway. “She’s changed since she got this job but that’s normal…isn’t it?”

“Have you changed a lot since you got your job?”

Sam sat down, his legs feeling more unsteady than he wanted to admit. “No,” he finally said. “Not as much.” Perhaps that was the problem with their marriage. But he couldn’t just turn into another person, not like she had.

Max rubbed his chin and then pulled a notebook from the inside pocket of his coat, slid the tiny pencil out from its spine and thumbed to a particular page. “I want you to listen to these times and tell me if you know where you were.”

Max listed all the times he’d been at Leanne’s apartment. Sam felt nauseous by the end. “I was at her new flat—our new flat—in London. I’m supposed to be moving up there. Theoretically.”

“I wouldn’t if I were you.” The gargoyle looked up from the corner of the rug he’d been snuffling around. “Must be something bloody wrong with that place.”

Sam reached for his beer and realised he’d left it in the kitchen. He unpeeled his tongue from the roof of his mouth. “Do you think the Thorn brothers are…I dunno…doing something to Leanne? Or the flat?”

“It’s not them.” Max sounded confident. “They’re going to be in Exilium for a long time. Your wife wears a similar wedding ring to yours, I assume?”

“Yes, we made them together. I made hers and she made mine. Oh, fuck. Is this something to do with the wedding-ring protection thing?”

“Perhaps. Do you remember where you made them?”

Sam nodded and dug his phone out of his back pocket. “I’ve got the number of the forge here. I got it off Leanne this weekend, turns out her boss recommended the place to her.”

“Is this boss of hers involved with the new flat in any way?” Max asked.

“It’s a company flat and he chose it for her. He said it had the best view in the building. Fuck, is Neugent dodgy? Is he a fucking Fae?”

“Unlikely, if he recommended making those rings.”

“But something is definitely dodgy,” the gargoyle said. “We need to check that apartment out. Have a sniff about and see what’s what.”

“Agreed,” Max said and looked at Sam. “You need to take me there.”

“Now?”

“As long as your wife won’t be there.”

“She will be there now, but she’ll be out at work tomorrow. I’ve got a key.” Sam stopped. What was he saying? He shouldn’t tell Max where Leanne lived—where he might be living himself very soon.

“Good.” Max stood up. “I’ll come here at dawn. Don’t leave the house. We’ll go to London together, you can show me the flat, we’ll come straight back.”

“But what about—” the gargoyle began but Max held up a hand.

“We’ll talk later,” he said to it.

“I’m not sure this is a good idea,” Sam said as Max positioned his walking stick.

“It’s not open to debate. You and your wife are at risk,” Max said. “We’ll see ourselves out.”

The gargoyle gave a terrifying grin as it passed Sam. Max closed the front-room door behind them. There was the sound of movement, then silence. However they got in, they used the same way to get out.

Sam retrieved his beer, tried to think of any solution to the problems ahead and came up with nothing. He belched. “Fucksticks,” he whispered as he realised there was another problem: there was no more beer in the house and there was no way he wanted to spend the rest of the evening alone and sober.

9

Will moved away from Amelia's door and walked slowly to the top of the stairs. The smell of bacon and fresh bread made his stomach rumble. He'd barely touched the honeymoon supper and had hardly been conserving his energy overnight. A bite to eat before he left wouldn't make a great difference, surely.

He followed the smells to a dining room where Cornelius was seated alone at the table. When he entered, Cornelius stood, making William all too aware of the power he had over him now.

"Sit down, old chap," he said cheerfully, heading towards a table laden with covered silver dishes. He filled a plate, his back to Cornelius, imagining the baleful stare being directed towards him. It was inevitable: he'd just destroyed his sister's virtue. He had to tread carefully.

Will sat across from Cornelius and the butler offered tea, which he accepted. The bacon was just crispy enough to be perfect, the toast still fluffy on the inside, the butter creamy and satisfying.

"I'm glad I caught you," Will said after a few mouthfuls. "I wanted to see whether you have everything you need."

"Yes, thank you. We've wanted for nothing."

"I trust the servants meet your expectations."

"Yes, thank you."

Will turned to the butler. "Could you leave us in private, please?"

The butler bowed and closed the door behind him. Will set down his cutlery to sip his tea.

“I’m keen to talk to you about the future,” he said, aware that Cornelius hadn’t yet looked him in the eye. “We haven’t had the chance to talk since that awful night in Aquae Sulis. I should imagine it’s been the most terrible time for you and your sister.”

“Yes.” Cornelius abandoned his toast. “It has been rather unpleasant, but not as much as it has been for the rest of our family, thanks to you.”

Cornelius was doing his best to hide it, but Will could still detect the anger beneath the polite words. “Dreadful business,” he said. “I couldn’t let the Agency take you and Amelia, not after we’d become friends.”

“Despite what Horatio said about us.”

“Those were the words of a desperate man,” Will said as lightly as he could. He’d believed every single one, but it didn’t serve his interests to tell Cornelius that. “You were a good friend to me, warning me about his character. I couldn’t allow Amelia to be rounded up and carted off by those awful people.” He watched Cornelius considering his words. “But it does make things rather awkward now, wouldn’t you agree?”

Cornelius simply nodded.

“Which is why I wanted to talk to you,” Will said, pausing to take another bite of toast. “I don’t like things to fester. Better to be straight with one another, wouldn’t you agree?”

Cornelius looked at him properly for the first time. “That’s not an approach favoured by many people in Londinium.”

Will grinned. “I’m not breakfasting with them. And I wouldn’t necessarily be like this with anyone whose regard meant nothing to me. But I value your respect, and would like to think our friendship could endure this tumult. I believe a frank discussion is just what we need.”

“I’m listening.” Cornelius was still guarded, no longer the man who, less than a week before, had been a self-assured elder brother escorting his

sister in a foreign city.

“You’re no fool, and my rather disgraceful appearance this morning will no doubt confirm your fears for your sister. I imagine you expected I would take her as a mistress, given the circumstances.”

Cornelius looked down at his plate. “I hadn’t realised how frank you intended to be.”

“I know I’m bordering on the indecent,” Will said. “But hear me out. It pains me that the only way Amelia and I can be together lowers her status and robs her of honour, but I wanted to assure you that I don’t see her as a mere plaything. I have the utmost respect for her, and have every intention of fulfilling my responsibilities towards her, and you, with as much decency as I can.”

“But you still take her virtue, sir,” Cornelius whispered.

“Only a saint could resist Amelia in these circumstances and that I am not. But I’m no monster either. I want to beg your forgiveness and seek your blessing.”

“How can I grant it, sir? She’s a fallen woman, excluded from Society and destined to be nothing more than your private whore.”

“Please, don’t call her that,” Will said, his voice hard. “My desire for her does not exclude her from Society. On the contrary, it keeps her as close to it as she can be. Her fall was the work of the Gallica-Rosas and your patron, not me. But I beg you, permit me to nurture the love between us and find something beautiful in this mess we find ourselves in.”

Cornelius scowled at the table. “She was destined for great things. You must understand how difficult this is.”

“I can only imagine how I’d feel in your place and that’s why we’re having this conversation. We have a choice, Cornelius. We let this destroy our friendship, with you living a shadow of a life, kept here only to save

your sister's heart. Or you embrace me as a brother-in-law and treat me as her husband for all intents and purposes, excluding a life outside this house. I have so much I can offer you, if you do this for me. For Amelia."

Cornelius stared at him, the cleft between his eyebrows deep. "You genuinely love her?"

"I do," he replied.

"Then I give my consent," he said, looking away again.

"Thank you." Will poured himself another cup of tea in the absence of the butler, and poured one for Cornelius too. "Now, we need to talk about the future. I'm to move to Londinium by command of my Patroon. The family wishes me to take the Dukedom, and if you help me to do that, I'll make you Marquis of Westminster and give you a place in Society once more."

Cornelius's eyes widened. "You'd do that, even though my family no longer exists?"

"You're an intelligent man with an intimate knowledge of this city and its residents. I need someone I can trust, someone who needs to succeed as much as I. Besides—" Will smiled "—before all of this I got along well with you and I can beat you at cards."

"Would I have the right to property again?"

Will could see he was tempted. "I would see to it personally that the deeds to this house would revert to you and you'd have the right to own other properties and invest in any businesses you wish. I don't want you to feel beholden to me and I don't want you to feel dependent. There's no worse thing for a capable man."

"And Amelia?"

"Would be a marchioness and we'll hang the gossips." Will pushed his plate aside and leaned forwards. "What say you? Together, we could forge a

path back into Society for Amelia and elevate you above the ones who turned their backs on your family. You would be free of worrying about your survival, and I would have a man I could trust, free of an agenda from a rival Patroon."

Cornelius nodded slowly. "I see it. Yes, it could work. I know enough, and you're capable with a wealthy and powerful family behind you." He extended his hand across the table. "I am yours, brother. I pledge my service to you as adviser."

Will clasped his hand with both of his. "Excellent. Now, more bacon, a brief rundown of the families to watch and then I must leave."

"I have a question," Cornelius said, his voice steadier and more like Will remembered. "If you don't mind, seeing as we're not ignoring any elephants in the room this morning."

"Go ahead." Will speared another rasher and dropped it onto the plate.

"I heard the servants say it was your wedding day yesterday. Is that true?"

"It is."

"Is it not customary to breakfast with one's wife during the honeymoon?"

Will sighed as he resumed his place. "Indeed. We've not had the best start. In fact, I fail to see how it could be worse."

"Forgive my saying so, but how do you expect to take the Court without a solid marriage? They'll want stability from a new Duke, and if they don't respect her, it will be all the harder for you."

Will's appetite ebbed away. "All you say is true, and I don't have an answer yet. Catherine is…different to anyone else I've known in society. But I'll get through to her. Now, tell me, who will put themselves forward once the dust settles? What was the old Duke like?"

“Horatio’s grandfather was not a popular Duke but he was a strong one,” Cornelius said, dunking a sliver of toast in the remains of his egg yolk. “His loss will shake up the Court immeasurably. He was Duke for over two hundred years, and his father held the title for three hundred before him.”

“What happened to the father?”

“Madness, so they say.” Cornelius shrugged. “I hear it happens to the very old ones. As for who will step forward, the first will be the head of the Semper-Augustus-Tulipa line. A regal lot—William of Orange was one of theirs, so they claim, and they haven’t lost the notion that they should be rulers. Other than them, the only other large family with any clout are the Violas, but they won’t be a problem.”

“Why?”

Cornelius smiled. “You’ll see. Your main competitor will be the Tulipa chap, but you have at least a fortnight or so to find your feet. The Marquis of Westminster won’t call the Court to convene with everything in chaos as it is now.”

“Why not? Surely this is the time a Court and a Duke are needed most.”

“Everyone will be terrified of a war, so they’ll all be speculating about who to back,” Cornelius replied. “They prefer to do all that behind closed doors. I suspect they’ll all be hoping that the strongest will step forward, declare his intention and be backed by such a majority it will be over quickly and painlessly.”

“Could the Tulipa achieve that?”

“Perhaps. It’s the most likely outcome, as things presently stand. When the Londinium residents hear about your intentions it will change the playing field.”

“Let’s dine together, once I’ve moved into my new house,” Will suggested. He wanted to pay full attention without being distracted by day-old clothes and a poorly tied cravat. “I’ll send a carriage for you.” He stood. “Thank you for hearing me out, Cornelius. I’m greatly heartened by this turn of events.”

Cornelius also stood and shook his hand. There was a reassuring warmth to his smile. “Thank you for your honesty. I have hope for our future once more, and I never thought I would. Before you go, there’s something you may not know about Londinium. Travelling between Nether properties can be dangerous. The roads between them are unprotected and people have been robbed in their carriages.”

“Highwaymen!” Will chuckled. “How quaint.”

“But with modern weapons from Mundanus,” Cornelius said. “Be careful. Some of the more paranoid travel in Mundanus and enter the Nether closer to the property. When you declare your intention to stand for Duke, I don’t think it would be a bad thing for you to do the same.”

His warning echoed in Will’s thoughts as he sat in the mundane taxi back to the flat. Londinium was a challenge on many levels, and Will regretted rushing straight into Amelia’s bed. He should have walked for an hour, cleared his head and gone back to talk it through with Catherine and try to build some sort of trust between them. He didn’t want to force her into anything but there were expectations that could rapidly become problematic if he didn’t win her over. The family would be waiting for the announcement of a pregnancy and Cornelius had been right about the need for a solid marriage.

The argument with Catherine pressed upon him and made him sink lower in the seat. He’d been exasperated with her because he expected her to just consummate the marriage as a simple matter of duty. He hadn’t

considered her feelings or whether the assumption that he now had a right to her body was even acceptable. He wouldn’t have dreamt of behaving so reprehensibly whilst on the Grand Tour so why should he treat Catherine so poorly?

But even as he considered her feelings there was an undercurrent of anger bred into him by his privileged life. This wasn’t the sort of thing he should need to worry about. Catherine should know what was expected of her and—

No. That was the voice of his father, not him. He looked out on the mundane crowds wrapped up against the cold and unaware of the mirror city he was soon to live in. He didn’t want to be Duke. He didn’t want to make Catherine miserable and himself in the process. She’d said with such bitterness that women didn’t have choices, but she didn’t realise that so few of the men did either.

10

Back in a corset and back in the Nether, Cathy sat in an elaborately decorated iris-blue day dress, looking out of the carriage window. William sat across from her but she tried to ignore that fact.

She was tired and nervous, an unpleasant combination. William hadn't told her anything about the house they were about to move into, only saying that it was supposed to be a "wonderful surprise". That made her more nervous than the prospect of meeting new servants and having to begin the farce of married life; his idea of a wonderful surprise was highly unlikely to bear any resemblance to her own.

She'd barely slept since the wedding. The first night had been lost to despair and pacing up and down the flat as she tried to think of some way out before he returned. She had exactly the same problem she'd had before they'd married: she could bolt, but the Irises would be able to find her anywhere she went in Mundanus or the Nether. The second night she'd laid awake next to him, crammed over as far on her side of the bed as possible, utterly freaked out by sharing a bed with a husband she didn't want. At least he hadn't tried to touch her, and hadn't mentioned the argument.

If married life was going to be all about non-conversations, her family had prepared her well. He didn't ask her where she'd been or what she'd been doing, which both surprised and relieved her, even though she had a cover story all worked out. Instead, he focused on making the most of the rest of the day. They'd visited the National Gallery, which did nothing but send her into a silent panic about having to produce the painting for Lord

Poppy, had afternoon tea at the Savoy, walked in St James's Park, gone out for dinner and then on to a show. It was a textbook romantic day out in London. Just with the wrong man.

She sneaked a peek at him, bored with the silver mists of the Nether. He was too handsome to be married to her and she expected whispered comments about that at the first social event attended together. He was clever, well-mannered, graceful and confident. All of his strengths would make her failings all the more apparent. Why couldn't they have married him to Elizabeth? Her sister would decorate his arm and not bruise his toes when they danced. She would know exactly what to say and when. This match was a disaster.

"What is it?" he asked. She'd failed to notice he was looking back at her.

"Nothing." She looked back out of the window.

"You're very quiet."

"I was just thinking."

"I still have that last song stuck in my head," he said, smiling. "It was a very strange show."

Cathy couldn't think of anything to say so she just nodded and looked back out the window. She consoled herself with the fact that she at least had a mobile phone. Once she knew their new address she could arrange for the rest of her tech to be sent and she could get in touch with her course tutor and look up her reading list. Above all she needed to work out a way to make contact with the Sorcerer of Wessex again so she could earn the boon he'd promised her. Being dependent on a Sorcerer hundreds of miles away who had no interest in helping her wasn't an ideal situation, but it was the best she had.

"What are you thinking about?" he asked. "It seems very serious."

“That show,” she lied. “Musicals are weird. No one seems to mind when people randomly burst into song.”

“I feel that way about opera,” Will replied. “Oli made me sit through a performance of the Ring Cycle whilst we were on the continent, all those people blasting arias at each other for hours on end.” He grimaced. “At least last night’s show was only a couple of hours.”

There was a pause. She fiddled with the beading on her dress.

“I thought yesterday was very pleasant, didn’t you?” Will asked.

“Yes,” she said, trying her best to be nice. It wouldn’t be helpful to comment on how she had found it socially agonising to make small talk and steadfastly not address the dire situation they were in. She’d come to two conclusions. One, she had to find a way to be replaced by the Irises that didn’t involve her death or the Agency. Two, she would probably have an easier life in the meantime if she was civil with William.

It helped that she felt sorry for him. It wasn’t his fault, any more than it was hers, and as long as he didn’t force himself upon her she would find a way to try and make things easier for him too.

If she could find a way to persuade him that a replacement would be best for both of them, he could become an ally, and the only way that was going to happen was if she found a way to make him really listen to her. If they became entrenched and even more alienated, he would just shut her out.

“Please don’t look so worried,” William said, leaning across to pat her hand. “You’ll love the house, I promise.”

“I’m not worried about that,” she said and cursed her inability to think first when worried. “It’s the…servants, I won’t know them.”

“There won’t be any, just the handover staff who’ve cleaned it and removed any trace of the previous owner. And my valet, of course, I didn’t

want to leave him in Aquae Sulis. I was given to understand you didn't have any attachment to your previous lady's maid."

"No." She didn't want to take any staff from her parents' household with her. They'd only report back to Aquae Sulis about every tiny detail and, besides, she didn't want any reminders of that imprisonment. "So we're not having other staff?"

He laughed. "Very funny." He frowned when he saw her confusion. "Catherine, as lady of the house you'll be hiring the staff. In fact, a person from the Agency will be there later this afternoon."

"Oh, God." She sank in the seat. "You're going to expect me to handle all of that kind of stuff, aren't you?"

"Why wouldn't I?" He seemed genuinely confused. "Weren't you taught how to run a household?"

She thought back to her lessons with Miss Rainer. They always started with a nod to some aspect of domestic management then rapidly moved on to more interesting subjects like revolutions or the Suffragette movement. Should she declare ignorance now and provide another excellent reason to replace her? Was it too soon? "It'll be fine," she said, trying her best to sound confident. She didn't want to arrive at the new house in the middle of an argument.

"Good. I'm going to be in a meeting for the afternoon, I have correspondence to catch up on and then I'll be dining with Cornelius, so feel free to have dinner whenever you wish."

It hadn't occurred to her that he would set the mealtimes. She could feel disaster looming and knew it would be caused by her ignorance of some minor detail, something any wife would know. "You're having dinner with Cornelius? Is that a good idea?"

The memory returned of the Gallicas being dragged off by the Agency, and along with it her sister's speculation about why William had saved the Albas. She was reassured to discover she still didn't care whether he had a mistress, but it seemed a risk to dine with someone who'd lost everything and had Will to blame.

"Why wouldn't it be?"

"I know they're indebted to you, but won't they see you as responsible for what happened to Lady Rose?"

"I made sure we understand each other. But I'm heartened you thought to ask the question, and I thank you for your concern."

He looked pleased. She silently admonished herself and decided to keep quiet for the rest of the journey. She didn't want to give him any hope that she could polish up into a decent wife; she had to tread a fine line between incompetence and being minimally polite, so he would advocate a replacement.

A tap on the roof of the carriage indicated they were soon to arrive. William pulled on his gloves and recovered his cane from the holder in the door.

Like a good Iris wife, Cathy was already covered by gloves reaching up to her shoulders and a cape over the top. For the tenth time that day she silently cursed Lord Iris.

They turned a sharp corner and an impressive neo-classical building came into view, welcome after the void of the Nether.

"Here we are." William smiled broadly. "The beginning of a new life."

She pretended to fuss over a glove to cover up her inability to be falsely enthusiastic. The carriage door was opened and he got out first to help her out onto the cobbles.

Cathy looked up at the columns of the pedimented portico, trying to place where she'd seen the building before.

"You recognise it?" He took her hand, something she still found irritating. Why did he have to touch her all the time?

"It's familiar," she said. "But I can't work out why."

"We walked past here yesterday. I confess I had the driver bring us round a different way, to keep the park a surprise."

"This is Lancaster House?"

"It is indeed."

Cathy spun around to see gardens and then behind them the trees of Upper St James's Park, known as Green Park in Mundanus. So that was why Will had chattered about it so much the day before, explaining that both St James's Park and Green Park were reflected in the Nether. The famous Londinium park was the envy of Aquae Sulis and their new home overlooked it. "Is the whole building ours?"

He laughed. "Yes, all of it. Of course, residents of Londinium hold keys to the park gates, but there are few properties that have such a fine view over it, not to mention private gardens reflected in the Nether. Let's explore, shall we?"

"We don't need a house this big," she whispered as she reluctantly took his arm.

"On the contrary, this property is fit for a King. Or should I say a Duke and Duchess? Even Queen Victoria called it a palace."

She looked away, feeling like somebody had dropped her into the wrong life. The house was magnificent, too magnificent for her to live there; its grandeur made her feel all the more inferior and ill-suited for the life William was steering her into.

He led her towards the entrance. A butler was waiting with a handful of servants in a line. He stepped forward and bowed.

“Welcome to your new home Mr Reticulata-Iris. Ma’am,” he said, with a slight bow to her. “My name is Shaw and I’ve been personally overseeing the renovations. I give my word that all traces of the previous owner have been removed.”

“Thank you,” William said. “May I see your credentials?”

The butler extended his left arm, palm upwards and pulled back the sleeve of his jacket and the shirt cuff. William inspected something Cathy couldn’t see from her angle and then nodded.

“The items sent from Aquae Sulis have been unpacked. Of course, should our choice of master bedroom and personal suites be erroneous we’ll move your belongings post haste. Would you like me to give you a brief tour and show you to your study?”

“Please do,” William said, his right hand folded over Cathy’s, holding it tightly tucked into the crook of his left arm. “My wife and I are eager to get settled right away.”

Am I? she thought, but didn’t say. Just as her father had always spoken for her, now her husband felt he could do the same. Don’t make a fuss, she thought, pressing her tongue into the roof of her mouth lest some acerbic comment fly out before she realised. Just wait for the right moment and then act.

They were escorted into the entrance hall and both of them stopped to take in its grandeur. Cathy’s eyes swept up the gilded staircase to the lantern-design roof two storeys above. The cavernous gilded space was breathtaking and she could imagine how much more dramatic the effect would be in the anchor property with sunlight to make the gold leaf glow.

The butler waited patiently and then showed them the ballroom, the green room and the dining room.

“In Mundanus this part of the anchor property is used for state visits and can be hired privately,” the butler said. “The building is closed to the public. I’ve taken the liberty of preparing a dossier of relevant information and an evaluation of mundane security for the anchor property.”

“Thank you,” William replied.

“As you can see, alterations to the décor have been minimal in these rooms as they’re simply reflected from the anchor property and not heavily adapted to an individual family line,” the butler continued. “However, the lesser rooms have had to be stripped more thoroughly and await your choice of redecoration.”

There was the smell of iris flowers. They liked their vases full of blooms just like any of the Great Families. It was strange to see the delicate blue petals instead of blousy red poppies everywhere. It added to Cathy’s sense of dislocation.

“Who were the previous owners?” she whispered to William.

“Horatio’s parents,” he whispered back. “I’m amazed they had enough restraint to not interfere with the state rooms too much. It’s up to you to make the rest of the house beautiful for us, Catherine.”

She swallowed, trying to force her tight throat open again. Interior design? Management of staff? This wasn’t what she was supposed to do with her life. But then, what was that supposed to be?

Lord Poppy had implied she had the potential to be a great artist after she’d made her third wish. She didn’t agree. What if the Charm didn’t arrive on time? Would Poppy turn Sam’s fingers into hungry rats as he’d threatened?

“Catherine?”

He’d stopped and was looking at her. “What?”

“Are you all right? You’ve gone quite pale.”

“Oh, yeah, yes. Thank you. Just…I’m fine.”

She focused on following the butler, trying to ignore William’s attentiveness. Surely with only one other person present, who had his back to them, he could drop the show for a moment?

“And this is the master bedroom suite,” the butler announced, opening the door onto a huge bedroom with plain walls and a bed at its centre. “The bed is new,” the butler said, “and can be changed if not to your taste.”

“Indeed,” William said. “Dressing rooms through there, I take it?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And through there?”

“We took the liberty of keeping a private corridor to a suite of rooms in the mundane property, Sir,” he said, leading them both down the connecting hallway and opening a stout door at the end. “This is the nursery.”

William pulled her in. The scent of fresh mundane air was unmistakeable after the feather-like brush of crossing over into Mundanus. It was the only room she’d seen redecorated so far and the paint smelled fresh. She scanned the pastel walls and the frilly curtains that framed windows overlooking the park, glorious in the sunshine. The room was dominated by an elaborately carved cot covered in stylised irises and fleur-de-lis.

“This arrived today, sir, sent by your mother. I understand it’s a family heirloom.”

“It is indeed,” William said, beaming. “Isn’t it lovely, Catherine? What a perfect nursery. Soon our firstborn will be sleeping in there.”

Max adjusted the cap, making his forehead itch. The rucksack was uncomfortable and the straps kept trying to work their way off his shoulders as they approached the apartment building. It felt strange to be walking down a mundane street without the flap of his raincoat around his knees.

“You know, you look like someone in disguise,” Sam said. “I thought you were like a detective. Surely you know how to be under cover.”

“I’m an Arbiter, I don’t normally hide in the line of my work. In fact it’s usually the opposite.”

“So you just dress like a private detective, rather than being one?”

“I wear what I feel comfortable in, and what’s acceptable in public.”

“Don’t take this the wrong way,” Sam said as they reached the lobby, “but have you seen any men wearing a fedora on the way here?”

“I wear a trilby.”

“Whatever, have you?”

“I can’t say that I have.”

“That’s because men stopped wearing them over fifty years ago. Sorry, but when you walk down the street, you look weird.”

Max mulled this over as they crossed the lobby. He was used to innocents staring at him but he’d always assumed it was because of his unpleasant face and total lack of emotion. The possibility that it was because his clothes were out of fashion was revelatory. He wondered what the gargoyle would have to say about it when he got back to the Sorcerer’s house. It seemed to have an opinion on everything these days.

Now wasn’t the time to focus on his sense of fashion or lack thereof. He needed to identify what had caused Sam to disappear from Ekstrand’s tracking bug. When he’d reported that the cause seemed to be the wife’s apartment, Ekstrand speculated whether the wife was connected with the Sorcerer of Essex, whose wards could block the tracer. With the corruption

in London, and their suspicion that the Sorcerer of Essex was behind the murder of the Bath Chapter, it was of the highest priority to investigate.

He looked around the lobby as Sam wished the concierge good morning. The apartment building was modern and the security was good. The lift felt smooth and reliable as it carried them upwards.

“There’s no chance your wife will come home whilst we’re here?” Max asked once more.

“She’s at work, I checked again this morning. She won’t be home until tonight.” Sam leaned against the lift wall, hands in pockets. “This feels weird though, like I’m breaking into my wife’s home.”

“I thought you had a key. The concierge recognised you.”

“I do. She doesn’t know I’m here though. Oh shit, the concierge will tell her.”

“Tell him not to mention it to her because you’re organising a surprise.”

“Good idea,” Sam said, jangling the coins in his pockets with nervous energy. “You know I’m probably going to lose my job because of all of this crap?”

“If another agency is interfering with your wife, surely that’s more important to you?”

Sam nodded. “Yeah.”

The lift doors opened and the first thing Max saw was the copper detailing. He’d never say he was a man of instinct—it wasn’t a quality associated with having a dislocated soul—but he did have a good eye for the unusual.

He checked for residents as he stepped out. The brightly lit corridor was empty. He examined the nearest strip of copper running parallel to the floor like a dado rail. A scrape with his thumbnail revealed it was only copper

plated, with a thin layer of lacquer to prevent verdigris, covering a different metal underneath.

“Which is your wife’s apartment?” Sam pointed and Max followed him to the door.

“What do you think of the décor?” Sam pointed at the stylised horseshoe, pulling a face. “I’m not sure I like it.”

Max examined it and verified it had the same copper covering as the rail. “I think it’s very interesting.”

They went inside. “I’ve got to make a couple of phone calls,” Sam said, heading towards the living room and its light at the end of the corridor. “My boss will be in the office by now.”

Max observed the continuation of the décor in the apartment and how the bands of metal crossed the door with only a millimetre’s gap where it sat flush in the frame. Taking out his knuckle-duster, he reached up and scored into the plaster work near the top. As he’d suspected, there was a strip of metal sunk into the wall and covered over, meaning the metal continued unbroken around the doorway and down the other side of the hallway.

He confirmed it was present in all the rooms as he listened to Sam stumbling over an excuse to his boss. In the bedroom Max noted a large metal light-fitting hanging over the bed and suspected it was connected to the rest of the metal.

Max switched on the light, moved behind the bedroom door to a place where the rail wouldn’t be in constant view and scratched the layer of copper and lacquer off a small section. He rummaged in his backpack—it was hard to find his tools when they weren’t in the correct pockets on his person—and found his mini-screwdriver kit. The magnetised tip was enough to confirm his suspicion that iron lay underneath the copper.

After dropping the tool back into the bag and checking for mundane bugs and cameras, Max went to the living-room window and examined the gap between the triple glazing and a fine mesh laid between the inner two panes. It was only noticeable at a certain angle thanks to the sunlight breaking through the winter clouds. “Very subtle.”

He sat on a chair opposite Sam, plucked a small notebook from the depths of the rucksack and pulled out the pencil tucked into the spine.

“So how does it look to you?” Sam asked, trying to see what he was drawing. “Anything dodgy? Cameras hidden in the bedroom?”

“There are no hidden cameras,” Max said.

“Well, that’s something,” Sam said. “You checked everywhere, right? And you know what to look for?”

“I did and I do. Who does your wife work for?”

“Pin PR. They do all the communications and marketing for loads of different companies. She’s not one of those PR bunnies though. Leanne’s high up and runs international campaigns.”

Max flipped onto a new page in the notebook.

Wife works for Pin PR

High up in company

Who do they promote?

No rabbits

Then he went back to the original page. “And you’re certain her boss recommended the forge where you made your wedding rings?”

“Positive. He told me himself. He said he used it for his own wedding. So what’s with all the questions? Is there something else wrong with it?”

“Is there anything about her work that makes you uncomfortable?”

“You know you’re starting to freak me out now, right?” Sam moved to the edge of the sofa.

“I’m sorry,” Max said, “I need a little more information before I can decide what to share with you.” He tried to look reassuring, but as it always had with any innocent, it just made Sam squirm nervously. Max let his face fall back into its natural position.

“Anything about her work…Well, they make her work crazy hours, but she enjoys it. This apartment is top-notch but she pays a tiny rent because it’s subsidised by the company.”

Apartment provided by employer

Max added to the list. “Go on.”

“Her boss is called Marcus Neugent. Look, you said you’re not a private eye, but you know how to investigate people, don’t you? I mean, you do that to protect innocents, right?” When Max nodded, Sam leaned forward. “Then I think you should look into Neugent. I’ve never liked him.”

Max added his name to the list. “I’ll do that. What does he look like?”

“He’s in his fifties…greying hair, really blue eyes. So is there something weird about this place?”

Max jotted down the description and then looked up at Sam. “This apartment has been warded.”

“Warded? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It’s protected against other influences. Now, I don’t think they’ve warded it specifically against sorcerous magic, I don’t see any of the markers for that. It seems to be warded against the Fae.”

“Eh?”

“The copper strips, the horseshoe design on the door…copper renders the Fae’s minions inert if they come into contact with it, and the Fae themselves hate it.”

“That’s why you put on those weird plated gloves before you went through to grab Lady Rose that night we got Cathy’s uncle back?”

“Yes, it makes them weak. The copper design here is only plating though. There are bands of iron underneath.”

“Do the Fae not like iron either?”

“There’s a lot of superstition about it protecting people against the Fae, but it’s less effective than copper in our experience,” Max said. “There are traditions that still persist in some parts of England, horseshoes on doors being one of them. It could be that the iron is there to be thorough, or there could be another reason that I can’t determine yet.” He wondered if it was something hidden in the iron that was blocking the tracer, or something about the pattern of the metal bands that was beyond his knowledge.

“So you’re telling me it isn’t for show at all?”

Max sketched and then showed it to Sam. “This shows what the apartment would look like if you took away the walls and only the banding wards were left behind.”

“It looks like a cage!”

Max nodded. “Yes, it does.”

“Those bastards have put my wife in a flat that’s really a cage? That’s beyond fucked up!”

Max decided it would be wise not to mention the bedroom light fitting, and his suspicion that they were particularly concerned about when she slept. “I’m given to understand,” Max said, his voice flat in comparison to Sam’s panic, “that the cages at London Zoo are as much to protect the animals from the visitors as the visitors from the animals.”

“You’re saying they want to keep her safe? But why?”

“Lord Iron’s protection has been placed upon both of you, as we already know. This is no surprise, Sam, it simply confirms that, for some reason, one of the Elemental Court wishes to keep your wife safe. If anything, it

demonstrates they're more interested in her than in you. We just need to determine why."

"Yes, we bloody well do!" Sam stood. "I don't want to stay here, this is creeping me out."

"I'll look into Neugent, and the company your wife works for," Max said, putting the notebook away and following him to the door. "If it's any consolation, the members of the Elemental Court aren't like the Fae. They don't toy with innocents and they don't destroy people's lives."

"Not much of a consolation," Sam muttered, and they left.

Cathy woke with a cold compress on her forehead and the cape gone from her shoulders. She was lying on the new bed in the master suite, William sitting next to her.

"You fainted," he said before she spoke.

"I don't faint." Her head was woolly and her lips were tingling. "My sister does silly things like that, not me."

"Well, you did it very dramatically. Lucky it was just the butler there, if it had been a lady's maid there would be gossip about a pregnancy rushing through the house."

"No worries on that front." He was holding her hand again. She tutted and pulled it away. "You don't have to do that when we're alone, you know," she said, pulling herself up and trying to ignore the way the room span.

"I was concerned," he said stiffly and helped her onto her feet.

"I'm just tired." She held onto one of the posts to steady herself. "Obviously there's no other reason." She wondered briefly if Lord Poppy was interfering, but the teardrop diamond had turned back into a tear as

soon as she had left the Oak with William. And why make her faint anyway? The possibility that it could have simply been too upsetting to see the place she was expected to populate with babies made her horrendously ashamed of herself.

“You were pale at the top of the stairs. Is something troubling you? Is it the house?”

“No. We’ll rattle around inside like marbles, but there’s nothing wrong with it.”

“Good.” He smiled. “Only you could say that. Most women would gush with excitement.”

“I don’t gush either,” she said. Not with you, anyway, she thought.

“Will you permit me to approach you?” he asked.

She frowned. “What for?”

He moved closer, rested his hands on her shoulders. “Welcome to your new home, Catherine Reticulata-Iris,” he said softly, and gently kissed her cheek.

A blush competed with the frown. “Will you please stop that.”

“At least you have some colour in your cheeks again,” he said, and she pushed him away.

She was about to make some kind of excuse to extricate herself from his non-magical charm offensive, when the bedroom door rattled violently.

“Letterboxer,” they said simultaneously and a gilded letterbox appeared in the door. A letter shot through, skidding into the middle of the floor. As William picked it up, another came through, then, just as the letterbox started to fade, it reappeared again, precipitating a burst of letters as if they were being fired from a Gatling gun. After a brief pause the letterbox stretched and a large package wrapped in brown paper and tied with string tumbled through.

“Something from the Emporium for you, and these first two letters are for you too,” he said, handing them to her. “The rest are for me.”

“Oh, Mother said a gift was going to come straight from the Emporium.” Cathy was relieved to see the Shopkeeper’s seal on the back. She didn’t recognise the calligraphy on the first letter, but then the scent of lavender floated up from the fine paper. She flipped it over, noting that her uncle’s coat of arms had been pressed into the wax seal at a forty-five degree angle. It was the same code her mother still used, even now she was a Papaver. *Open only when alone.* “I suppose the time for correspondence has officially begun,” she said as he gathered up the dozens of letters. “Good grief, who are they all from?”

“It seems our arrival in Londinium has already done the rounds in the gossip circles. Impressive. I was expecting at least a week to settle in before all the invitations arrived.”

“I suppose it’s better than being snubbed, seeing as you care about that sort of thing.”

“They’re all desperate to know my agenda, no doubt. Now that’s interesting.” He inspected a seal. “Looks like this one is from a Tulipa. I’ll be in my study should you need me.”

Cathy opted to sit on the bed to read her letters. She had no idea what the time was, but her solitude would be short-lived and she didn’t want to waste time trying to find her way to the room that had been allocated to her. At first she was delighted that she’d have her own space with a desk and bookshelves to be filled, but when she realised it was provided for her to run the household affairs the delight had faded.

She opened her uncle’s letter first. It contained a second smaller envelope with “Catherine” written on it, which she held as she read the single sheet of sweet-smelling paper.

Darling Catherine,

I do hope you are positively delighted with your new home, for if you are reading this, you are surely chez toi. Has your delightful new husband told you Lancaster House was my wedding gift to you both? I hope its Bath stone makes you feel at home and that you settle quickly. I feel it was a suitable means of expressing my gratitude to you both for the parts you played in securing my return to Society. Fancy being rescued by the ugliest man in Albion, will wonders never cease?

In all seriousness, though, my darling one (I fear I have under-appreciated you over the years, permit me to correct that) I do know how brave you were to speak to an Arbiter and deal with the Sorcerer. From what he has told me, your new husband has a talent for taking credit where it is not entirely due, but I won't tell a soul, I promise.

It seems you have also impressed the Sorcerer, for he begged me to contact you and send the enclosed letter. I have not peeped, for to do so with a letter from a Sorcerer would be unwise indeed, so I cannot warn you or praise you for its contents. May it suffice to say the Sorcerer did seem to believe it was of the utmost importance that you receive it promptly and whilst alone.

I find it all rather thrilling, and trust that should I have occasion to visit Londinium, you will regale me with tales of intrigue and adventure, as long as it won't damage your standing in society.

Needless to say, sweet niece, should you or your husband wish to return to Aquae Sulis at any time you will stay as my honoured guests.

With the greatest affection and eternal gratitude,
Your loving Uncle Lavandula

P.S. I've heard tell that some of the Rosas are evading capture by the Agency. Should that be true, you must take care, as I believe your husband is seen as the architect of their downfall (they never were fair nor reasonable).

P.P.S. Do not travel the Londinium Nether roads alone, under any circumstances.

P.P.P.S. Lemon is strictly out of fashion amongst the Londinium Ton, however I understand that honeyed shades of gold are most popular amongst the fashionable elite. Avoid ringlets and square-toed shoes. Ta ta!

It was the first letter Cathy had ever received from a member of her family that had made her smile and it was a strangely pleasant feeling. She laid it on the bed and opened the small envelope from the Sorcerer, half expecting it to emit a puff of smoke and creepy music. But it was just a small card and a piece of paper folded twice.

I will be available to speak to you at 7pm tomorrow evening. When alone and free to converse with me, unfold the enclosed piece of paper and press on an interior door, formulae against the wood. Until then, keep the paper folded and out of sight.

She turned it over to see if there was anything else, but it was blank. So her uncle had passed on a note from the Sorcerer. Was that a good or a bad thing? It certainly suggested a great deal of trust between the two of them, but then the Sorcerer had engineered his rescue, which counted for something. Cathy grinned. That solved one of her biggest problems: how to

get in touch with him. She tucked the folded piece of paper into her bodice, slipping it between her corset and the dress so it didn't touch her skin.

As she was opening the other letter, a fine smoke wafted up from the Sorcerer's card and in seconds it had crumbled into ash. "Show-off," she muttered and read Lucy's letter.

Dear Catherine,

I hope you are well and settling in your new home. I haven't stopped thinking about you since the wedding day, I'm so sorry we didn't have the opportunity to speak in private, so I thought I would write you instead.

I could see how hard it was for you and Tom was so upset when we got home. He misses you. I wanted you to know that I'm here for you, and to reassure you that married life can be better than you might think. The trick is to look for the best in him, and in doing that, he'll find the best in you. This isn't just Californian hokey, please believe me.

I would very much like to visit you as soon as you are receiving visitors—there's so much for us to talk about. Let me know when it would be convenient. And I promise it will get easier.

With love,

Lucy x

Cathy laid it next to her uncle's letter. Lucy was sweet but what on earth did they have to talk about? The only thing they had in common was being married off, and Lucy didn't exactly share her feelings about that.

The door opened after a single knock and William came in with the bundle of letters still in his hand. She moved Lucy's letter over the patch of

ash.

“We’re having dinner at the Tulipas the night after tomorrow.” He held out the invitation.

She didn’t take it. “Who are they?”

“One of the most powerful families in Londinium. The man who has invited us is tipped to be the next Duke. No doubt there will be other important people there.”

“I’d prefer not to.”

William raised an eyebrow. “It wasn’t a request, Catherine, but a note for your diary.”

“I hate dinner parties.”

“Do you have something suitable to wear?”

“Didn’t you—”

He held up a hand. “Non-negotiable. We must attend as a couple, for goodness’ sake. It’s obvious.”

Cathy took a breath to argue, but where would it lead? “I’ll go if I can have tomorrow evening to myself.”

“There’s nothing planned for tomorrow,” he said irritably. “Though if you insist on negotiating every time an event comes up this simply won’t work.”

“My uncle tells me that lemon is strictly out of fashion,” she said with a sigh, knowing this wasn’t a fight to be won and looking back at the letter. “But ‘honeyed shades of gold’ are very popular. What’s that supposed to mean anyway? Honey isn’t a verb.”

William chuckled and she jumped at the unexpected noise. “It is if the Master of Ceremonies deems it to be so. That’s most useful, thank you.”

“It is? I thought it was drivel myself.”

William sighed and looked up as if hoping for divine intervention. “I’ll get a dressmaker onto it right away, shall I? Seeing as we have no one engaged here.”

“There’s no way they can make a dress in two days. Actually—” she held up her hands “—I don’t care. I’m sure your family has all kinds of clever ways to do stuff like that.”

“Indeed. Just don’t speak like that when we are in company, please,” William said. “And the chap from the Agency is waiting for you downstairs. Good grief, I feel like a butler, organising you like this.”

“You’d make a rubbish butler,” Cathy said, sweeping the letters off the bed in the hope that the worst of the ash would come with them. “They always bring tea with bad news.”

11

Cathy was shown to a sitting room in which two chairs and a table for tea had been placed. She wondered where the furniture had come from and whether she'd ever learn where all of the rooms were, before concluding that neither mattered in the grand scheme of things. If she had her way, she'd be gone before the house was fully decorated.

She had time to settle and smooth down her dress before the man from the Agency was shown in. She was struck by his lack of chin, giving his head the appearance of a partially inflated balloon held fast by his collar.

"Good morning, Mrs Reticulata-Iris." He bowed with a gentle click of his heels. The dark-grey wool of his Edwardian-style suit matched his close-set eyes perfectly. "My name is Mr Bennet."

"Good morning," she said and realised he was waiting for an invitation to sit down. "Please take a seat. Would you like tea?"

"Yes, please."

As he set down his briefcase Cathy felt like a child pretending to be her mother—something she'd never done in her actual childhood—making the experience all the more bizarre.

"On behalf of the Agency, may I offer our congratulations on your recent marriage, and welcome you to the fine city of Londinium."

"Thank you."

"Well, I imagine you are extraordinarily busy, so I will endeavour to keep this as short and uncomplicated as possible." He set the case on his

lap, opened it and extracted a notebook and pen as the tea was brought in and served.

“There is a lot to do,” she said, taking the cup and saucer handed to her gratefully. “It’s not just recruiting staff, as you can see, most of the house needs to be redecorated and furniture bought.” Was that her talking? She was slipping into role. The tea and context were probably—hopefully—making her behave this way. She fidgeted, wondering whether she should say something desperately inappropriate, just to make sure she was still herself.

“I can help with all of these concerns, in fact, it is my pleasure and privilege to do so.” The more he talked, the less she liked him. Any minute he would rub his hands and give the oily smile of a man thinking about money. “However, I suggest we begin with the staff. I understand that in addition to this, may I say, *magnificent* residence there are several anchor properties and their Nether reflections which pay a tithe to the estate, three carriages housed in outbuildings and a shortcut to stables owned in Bathurst Mews near Hyde Park.”

He knew more about the house than she did. A shortcut to mundane stables; that was something to note. Animals couldn’t cope with prolonged periods in the Nether. She’d be able to cut across town and into Mundanus with the easy excuse of seeing to a matter in the stables. It was better than her rudimentary plan of using the nursery wing to access Mundanus, which would have involved sneaking though the anchor property to get out. Her uncle’s warning about the Londinium Nether roads came back to mind; perhaps that was why the Rosas insisted on interconnecting their properties, to avoid the need to travel between them. Presumably the Iris cleaners had severed all those doorways. But where were Cornelius and Amelia being kept? Would the whereabouts of Will’s mistress qualify as an Iris secret?

Cathy decided it wouldn't be enough to satisfy Lord Poppy and, besides, there was still the tiniest chance that Will planned to be faithful.

"Ma'am?"

She blinked at him. "Sorry, I have a lot on my mind."

He gave a weak smile. "I asked if you've brought any staff with you."

"My husband brought his valet, that's all."

He made a note of that. "And do you have any plans to bring staff at a later point, or will the valet be the only one?"

"Just him," she replied, wondering what the Sorcerer wanted. She had to remember to bargain hard; she might not get another chance to see him.

She focused back on Bennet. He was scribbling away at something and muttering a little as he did so. She sipped the tea and planned to write back to Lucy inviting her to visit. Being married into Albion Society, having been born in America, must be tough. Giving her sister-in-law a legitimate break from the social pressures of Aquae Sulis was the least she could do.

"I think that's everything on the staff front." Bennet finally looked up from his notes. "When would it be convenient for you to interview the candidates for the positions of steward, butler and housekeeper?"

Her mother would be pleased that her wayward daughter now had an estate large enough to merit more than just a head butler. "Haven't we missed a bit out?" she asked.

"I'm sorry?"

"Don't we need to discuss the other staff?"

"Generally our clients leave all the arrangements to us." He closed the notebook. "There's no need for you to concern yourself over the trifling details. Once you have chosen the right steward, butler and housekeeper for your household they will ensure the staff settle in and work according to your desires."

Cathy set her cup down. Whilst she hated the thought of having to deal with running a household, she had to be careful that her family didn't bribe the Agency to bring in staff to spy on her. Perhaps her family didn't care about her now she was safely married off, but a bit of healthy paranoia wasn't going to do any harm. "But I'm interested in the details."

"It really isn't—"

"Mr Bennet, I may be a new bride, but please, don't make me feel like you're trying to give me the brush-off."

"Give you…? Of course not, madam, I simply assumed you'd like to make an appointment for our interior designer to visit and discuss your requirements."

Cathy folded her arms and mustered a glare she'd learnt from her mother. "I want to know the details of the staff who will be sent to work in my house. It's not an unreasonable request."

He raised his eyebrows and looked down at the notebook, noisily sucking in a breath to convey his disapproval without openly offending her. "As you wish." He flipped through the pages one by one until he came to the most recent. "For a household of this size and status, I calculate you'll require just under one hundred servants in total, broken down into—"

"How on earth did you reach that number?"

Mr Bennet pursed his lips, making his non-chin recede even further. "Am I to understand you would like me to list every single one?"

"How about you just show me your workings-out?" She held out a hand for the notebook.

"This is highly irregular, I will contact you in writing and include a full list of staff to be sent."

"Well, I'd prefer to know why we need so many *before* they arrive. That doesn't seem irregular to me at all."

Reluctantly he handed over the notebook. “I see the error,” she said as she scanned the list.

He coughed. “Error? I’ve been working in my capacity as procurement manager for over eighty years and I have never once made an error in my staff requirement calculations.”

“That makes today an interesting day for you then.” Cathy smiled at his discomfort. “You’ve assumed all of the bedrooms will be in use. Quite why fails me. Even if the small army of staff you propose were to live upstairs it would be less than half full.”

“But—”

“And you’ve calculated that we’ll be having huge banquets twice a week, which isn’t going to happen any time soon—we’ve just moved here. And I don’t see why we would have people assigned to clean the rental properties—surely the residents take care of that and we just maintain the building?” Living in Mundanus and paying attention to details to avoid scams that landlords and rental agencies employed to exploit students had prepared her surprisingly well. “I suggest we start with a basic assumption that, at any one time, somewhere between one and five per cent of the rooms need to be maintained for ready use. The rest can be left empty until needed. I can’t imagine us ever having enough guests to fill the house anyway. How ridiculous. I think that would take the entirety of Aquae Sulis Society and that’s never going to happen.”

“That is irrelevant,” Bennet flustered, “everyone will expect the house to be maintained as if it were full.”

“Everyone? Who?”

“Society. You wouldn’t wish them to think you were penny-pinching. Madam.”

“Oh, for goodness’ sake, I couldn’t care less what they think, and quite frankly it’s none of their business. So, based on a more realistic usage, that means instead of that absurd number of chambermaids and laundry staff, we’re likely to need this many.” She crossed out his number and replaced it with twenty-five. “That makes the salary bill too high, and that’s a crazy estimate for the cost of fuel and water…” After a few moments she handed it back to him and watched him pale.

“This is most irregular.” He slapped the notebook shut.

“That may be so, but I have more questions about how you break down the cost of the other expenses listed,” she said, amazed that this household management business was so much more satisfying than she’d ever imagined it could be. She pulled herself up, not wanting to be sucked totally into the role expected of her. No, the management wasn’t satisfying, it was the pleasure of catching Bennet out. The day she started to enjoy picking curtain fabric was one to be worried about, not this. “But first, perhaps you’d like more tea? And some cake too, I think. You are rather pale.”

As she poured, it occurred to Cathy that the Agency must have sent Miss Rainer to her parents’ household to be the governess. With a jolt she realised that she could find out where Miss Rainer was employed now and request that she be transferred to her household. A fantasy rolled out ahead of her, vivid and enthralling, of being able to debate and discuss books with her governess once more whilst they worked towards an escape. Then they could both flee to Mundanus and be free to pursue their own lives and ambitions and remain friends.

“Mr Bennet, I’d very much like to employ a member of staff formerly of my parents’ household. She was my governess, called Miss Rainer, but I don’t know where she’s working now. Could you find out for me?”

“Ah.” Bennet, having recovered his composure, rested his notebook on his knees. “I took the liberty of looking up who your governess was before I came today. It’s a common request, you see, many clients like to have the same staff teach their own children.”

The look on his face made Cathy’s excitement curdle in her stomach. “Where is she now?”

“I’m afraid Miss Rainer passed away a couple of years ago.”

“How? She was young and healthy!”

Bennet cleared his throat. “I understand it was a complaint of the heart and there was no suffering. I am sorry. There are other excellent governesses who can be sent when you require one.”

He accepted his cup of tea as Cathy struggled to take it in. Miss Rainer died whilst she was at Cambridge. She never had the chance to tell her that she’d managed to break away and live a new life in Manchester, let alone give her freedom too.

A memory of a lesson about Aphra Behn returned with sudden brightness. “This is what Virginia Woolf wrote about her,” Miss Rainer had said as words appeared beneath the graceful turn of her fountain pen. With a smile she slid the small piece of paper across the table, like a conspirator sending a secret message.

Cathy, fifteen at the time, picked it up and read it aloud. “‘All women together ought to let flowers fall upon the tomb of Aphra Behn, for it was she who earned them the right to speak their minds.’”

Even now Cathy could remember that glint in Miss Rainer’s eyes as Cathy returned her smile. “Have you done that, Miss Rainer?”

“Oh, yes,” her tutor replied. “And you will too. She has a gravestone in the east cloister of Westminster Abbey. It’s easy to find.”

And Cathy did. The first day she went into London to sneak to the Emporium and start work for the Shopkeeper, Cathy went to Westminster Abbey with a posy of sweet peas and laid them on Aphra Behn’s gravestone next to a bundle of tulips tied with blue ribbon. The fact there was someone else in Mundanus who felt moved to do the same made Cathy’s chest swell with happiness.

She had to find out where they’d buried Miss Rainer but she didn’t want Bennet to know her need. It was a private thing and Cathy didn’t want to tarnish her personal pledge by exposing it to the air in clumsy words. She would lay flowers on Miss Rainer’s grave and thank her for giving her the courage to not only speak her mind but act too.

Max sat on the wooden chair in the ballroom, waiting in a pool of light cast by the lantern near his feet. “No,” he called through the door.

“Oh, come on,” the gargoyle’s voice rasped. “I can help.”

“You’ll be a distraction.”

“Exactly. She’ll drop her guard if I’m in there with you. You saw what she was like the night we got the Master of Ceremonies back. She couldn’t keep her hands off me.”

Max folded his arms, eyes fixed on the wall ahead. “She scratched behind your ear. Don’t exaggerate.”

“We could do the good cop, bad cop thing.”

“I don’t even know what that means,” Max said, but as he finished the sentence a sense of two interrogators playing off each other surfaced in his mind.

“You need to read more. And let me in.”

Max pulled himself up with the help of his walking stick and opened the door. “Don’t get carried away,” he said to the gargoyle as it grinned at him. “Let me do the talking.”

The stone creature stalked into the room, lowering its head as it sniffed the floor and gave it a predatory look. Max closed the door and locked it again, even though he knew Mr Ekstrand would be arriving shortly. He wanted to make the point that he took security seriously. Max pointed at a corner and the gargoyle went and hunkered down in it, grumbling.

Moments after Max had sat back down, the door was unlocked and Ekstrand entered, wearing the same suit, cloak and bandanna across the face as he had the night they rescued the Master of Ceremonies. He carried his magnifying glass instead of the cane and noticed the gargoyle. “Should that be in here?”

“The puppet seemed to like it, sir, and it may make her drop her guard.”

“Don’t let her inspect the formulae too closely.”

“I won’t, sir.”

As Ekstrand nodded, an outline of a doorway burned into the wall opposite him. Max reminded himself of the objective, got to his feet and readied himself for any foul play.

The door materialised, opened and the puppet stepped through and closed the door quickly behind her. She was dressed in mundane clothes with satin gloves that looked out of place.

“Good evening,” Max said.

“Hey,” the gargoyle called from the corner.

She looked at Ekstrand, swallowed and then waved in the gargoyle’s direction uncertainly. Her eyes flicked about the room before she looked at Max properly. “Good evening, Mr Sorcerer, Mr Arbiter.”

“You know the drill,” Max said, approaching to frisk her, but she took a step back.

“Just make sure you don’t touch my skin, whatever you do.”

“I’ll check her,” Ekstrand said and beckoned her further into the room. “Close your eyes.”

“Why?”

“So we can be more civilised than before,” he replied and she did so.

He went behind her and peered through the magnifying glass. “Good grief,” he muttered, and then moved the inspection across her left hand. “Damnable things, wedding rings.”

“You’re telling me. You can see it through my gloves?”

“It’s cursed.”

“I know. I daren’t take it off. I’m not wearing anything else that’s dodgy. Actually, can you tell if it’s linked to Lord Iris?”

“Not actively, not this moment,” Ekstrand replied. “But it’s tied deeply to your soul. I’d be unsurprised if he knew when it was removed. Fascinating. The Irises take their marriages seriously, it seems. Other than that she’s clean.” He stepped away, tucked the magnifying glass under his cloak. “You can look again now.”

She peered up at him, seeming braver. “I don’t know why you’re bothering with the face-mask thing. I’m hardly going to run off and tell people we’ve met, am I? And it’s not like I could bump into you on the street.”

“It’s standard procedure when dealing with your kind,” he said, and Max noticed her wince.

Ekstrand sat on an empty chair next to Max and gestured to the one in front of them. She scanned the shadows as she crossed the room and sat. “Is this where I was before?”

Max ignored the question. “We have a lot to discuss, and I’m sure you don’t have a lot of time.”

She nodded. “True enough. Why did you want to see me?”

“You said the last time we dealt with each other that you wanted my help,” Ekstrand began. “I’m giving you the opportunity to earn it.”

She folded her arms and crossed her legs. “I’m listening.”

“We need to talk to one of the Rosas,” Max said. “We know some of them are hiding in Londinium or possibly London.”

“Why do you need my help to find them? Don’t you have sorcerous means to do that?”

“It’s not possible, in this instance,” Ekstrand said.

“Why?”

“That’s all you need to know,” Ekstrand replied.

“The first time we met, you said you wanted protection from your family,” Max began. “You said you weren’t like them. Then when you returned from Exilium Sam told us you knew about things one of your kind normally wouldn’t. Can you explain how?”

“I lived in Mundanus for a while.”

“That’s not usual for a female puppet,” Ekstrand said.

She swore under her breath. “Look, if we’re going to actually work with each other you need to stop calling me that. I have a name, it’s Cathy. It’s not my fault I was born into Society, it’s not my fault the bloody Fae are constantly screwing up my life. I’m a person, and not like all of the other people who live in the Nether.”

“I apologise,” Ekstrand said.

“Point taken,” Max acknowledged. She would always be a puppet though, regardless of how she chose to delude herself. “Can you explain why you spent time in Mundanus?”

“Look, let’s get to the point here, I don’t have time to justify myself to you both. We need to make a deal and quick, before someone notices I’m gone. I ran away from my family, I lived in Mundanus for about three years. Lord Poppy, the bastard, found me and dragged me back into Society. I had a plan to make a deal with you guys that day you took me, so I could escape before I was married off. But because you were so busy playing your Us versus Them game and wouldn’t listen to me, I’ve been married off to a man I hardly know. Now, if you want my help you need to get me out of the Nether and protected from Lord Iris, Lord Poppy and the rest of the so-called Great Families before my husband rapes me in the name of consummating a marriage, or I’m going to be a lot less inclined to help you. Clear enough?”

“We’ll get you out,” the gargoyle said, coming out of the shadows. “Right?”

Max gave it a steady stare, willing it to back off. “You’ve made your point, pup…Cathy. You hid from your family, so you know the best way to hide using the Charms and artefacts available to those in Society, yes?”

She nodded. “You want me to tell you how I did it?”

“Yes,” Ekstrand said.

“No,” Cathy replied. “I can’t do that.”

“But you need to help us so we help you,” Ekstrand said. “What harm could it do to—”

“No,” she repeated, more forcefully. “I can’t tell you, I’m sorry. It would break a promise. But I can still help. Do you want to speak to a particular Rosa, or just any?”

“We want to speak to the head of the Gallica-Rosa line or the Alba-Rosa line,” Max replied. They were complicit in the plot against the Master of

Ceremonies, and the two most powerful families in the Londinium Court. It stood to reason that one of them would know something useful.

“If I tell you where you can find them, I want you to free me from this curse and hide me from the Fae in return. You can do that, right?” She was looking at Ekstrand. “I mean, you’re probably one of the few people in the Split Worlds who’d know how.”

“I could,” Ekstrand said. “But I’ll only do that when I know I no longer need you in Fae-touched Society.”

“But she needs to get away from them now!” The gargoyle’s voice was half-growl.

“One more word from you and you’re out,” Ekstrand said, pointing a long finger at him. He looked back at the puppet. “This is just the first step to finding out what we need to know. The information you provide will help, but not solve the issue. If I’m to free you from the ties of your blood, you need to work harder than that.”

“You’re all the same,” she muttered. “You don’t give a shit about people, we’re just the proverbial pawns on the chessboard.”

“It’s the way of the Worlds,” Ekstrand said, without sympathy. “There is far more at stake than your happiness.”

The puppet fidgeted for a moment and then said, “All right then, if you insist on being just the same as the Fae, how about this: I’ll tell you where to find the head of the Gallica-Rosa line but in return I want you to find all the information you can on an employee of the Agency. She was a servant, not a member of one of the Great Families, so it shouldn’t be hard to find out. Then if you need me to help with your Rosa problem, I will. In return you help me to get out of the Nether and hidden away from the Irises for good. Deal?”

“Who do you want to find?” Max asked.

“Deal?”

“Yes,” Ekstrand said with an impatient wave of the hand.

“She’s called—or was called—Miss Rainer. She was my governess for about ten years. She died about two years ago.”

“She was involved with the Agency?” Ekstrand asked.

“Duh, of course she was,” the puppet replied, and then her eyebrow twitched. “You do know the Agency provides all the staff, don’t you?”

“Of course,” Ekstrand said, but the puppet looked unconvinced. She was sharp.

Max whispered in the Sorcerer’s ear, concerned that the longer Ekstrand stayed, the more of their ignorance he’d give away. “I think I should take it from here, sir.”

Ekstrand nodded and stood up. “The Arbiter will deal with the details. I’m needed elsewhere.”

The puppet nodded slowly, watching him leave, then looked at Max once the door to the rest of the house was shut and locked.

“All right,” Max said. “So where do I find the Rosas?”

She smiled. “At the Agency. They were rounded up the night we all spoilt their party.”

“I knew that already,” Max said. “I need more.”

“If that’s the case, why not just go and demand a search? Why bother to ask me for help?” She leaned forwards, the smile widening. “You don’t know anything about them, do you?”

“No, we don’t,” said the gargoyle.

“Go outside,” Max said to it.

“She knows already, stop treating her like an idiot. There’s no time for this crap,” it replied. It went and sat next to her. It smiled and lowered its

head, inviting a scratch behind the ears that she gave readily whilst smirking at Max.

“He’s right,” she said. “OK, how about this: I tell you what I know about the Agency and help you to track down their headquarters and in return you bring me the information on Miss Rainer.”

“There’s no other way to get to a Rosa?”

“No,” she replied, but he didn’t believe her.

“It would save time if there was.”

“There isn’t.” She said it firmly enough to convince him she’d have to be persuaded in an unpleasant way to tell him. “Look, this way is mutually beneficial and we can start as early as tomorrow. I’ll send a note to their rep. Give me something to put in his bag or pocket, something you can track through the Nether. Have you got something like that?”

He nodded. “I’ll get one and send it via your uncle, with instructions. I take it that method is still secure?”

“Yep. OK, the Agency…”

He listened as she described her understanding of the Agency and her interactions with its representative. He didn’t ask any questions or request any clarifications, letting his silence prompt her to speak more. When she was done, the puppet stood, brushed the gargoyle’s cheek with her thumb and went back towards the place in the wall she came through. “Are you going to open a Way for me?”

He retrieved the Opener from its resting place under his chair and struggled to his feet.

“We’ll do this as quick as we can,” the gargoyle said as Max hobbled over. “Don’t let that husband bully you into anything.”

She didn’t reply, just looked sadly at the stone creature. “You’re sweet,” she said finally and kissed the top of its head as Max drove the Opener’s pin

into the wall. She gave him one last glance after he opened it and went through.

When the Way was closed and the Opener was back in his pocket, Max turned to the gargoyle. “I’m not sure that’s how good cop, bad cop is supposed to go.”

The gargoyle’s shrug was made impressive by its huge stone shoulders. “I felt sorry for her.”

“That’s what they’re good at making people do. It’s called manipulation.”

The gargoyle shook its head. “It’s called empathy, you cold bastard,” it said, and left Max to hobble out alone.

12

Will watched Catherine fiddle with the fingers of her gloves, newly made in a warm shade of gold silk. “Try not to be so nervous.”

“You say that after spending most of the afternoon coaching me and saying how important it is every five minutes.”

“Well, I felt you should know.” He twisted the cane; her nervous energy was leaching into him. “And you learned practically everything the first time so there’s nothing to worry about on that front.”

“A bunch of names and anecdotes is hardly quantum physics. Sorry, you were trying to be nice again, weren’t you?”

He sighed. “I’m trying to reassure you. You seem to need it.”

“Look, I told you that I was a bad match. I told my family and no one listened. Just don’t go postal on me when I screw something up tonight, because you’ve had ample warning.”

“‘Go postal’?” He waved away the explanation, noticing she said *when* rather than *if*. “Just don’t discuss politics or pick out any flaws and you’ll be fine.”

“I know. I stick to fashion —” she mimed being sick in a most uncouth manner “—the joy of being newly married and the ‘delicious challenge’ of decorating our grand new house. You’d be better off paying a professional actress to pretend to be me, rather than me pretending to have any interest in these topics. Actually, that’s not a bad idea.”

“Catherine.”

She went back to glove-fiddling.

“Do you like your dress?”

“Well, I know what honeyed gold looks like now. If only my uncle could see me he’d weep with happiness.”

“You look lovely.”

“The *dress* looks lovely, William,” she replied. “Whereas you look handsome.”

It was the first time she’d genuinely complimented him. “Thank you,” he said with a smile. If only she could accept a compliment given to her.

At the tap on the roof from the driver they both readied themselves for arrival. Whilst he was taking care not to show it, Will was nervous too. They both had to make an excellent impression and also weigh up the opposition. Cornelius had given him vital information that would make it easier for him, but Catherine’s social skills were a concern and she would be on her own after dinner.

The carriage slowed and he peered out of the window at the entrance to Hampton Court, dismayed by how much it looked like a ducal residence, even if it was out in the middle of nowhere.

He got out of the carriage and helped her down the steps. The Tulipa butler greeted them and led them through a beautiful formal garden. “This is the reflection of the Privy Garden created in the reign of William III,” he said with pride.

Of all the routes into the grand palace, Tulipa had picked this one. They were being reminded of the fact it was once owned by a King who was a puppet of the Tulipas.

They were led into the grand Tudor buildings, guided through a variety of breathtaking chambers and then shown into a relatively humble receiving room. A man he recognised from Cornelius’s description as the Tulipa was handing a glass of sherry to one who was presumably the Viola. He

wondered if he and Catherine had been given a slightly later time on the invitation so as to enable the Londinium residents to observe their entrance.

“Mr and Mrs William Reticulata-Iris,” the butler announced and the doors were closed behind them.

“Ah, excellent, now we are complete.” The host smiled and approached. “Permit me to introduce myself. I’m Bartholomew Semper-Augustus-Tulipa.” He gave a formal bow which Will duly returned.

“Thank you for your kind invitation,” he said. “May I introduce my wife, Catherine.”

He watched Tulipa kiss her gloved hand, taking the opportunity to study him. The host was tall and most handsome, with dark brown hair tied back in a ponytail by a short black ribbon and eyes so brown they were almost black. He wore clothes in the late-eighteenth century style, and wore them well. His elaborately embroidered red jacket and long waistcoat glittered in the sprite light. Cornelius had reported his true age to be over two hundred and fifty but Bartholomew looked like he was in his thirties. Will had felt nauseous when he’d heard the true age, realising he was to be pitted against a man who’d lived ten times longer than he.

“A pleasure, Catherine,” Bartholomew said. “I welcome you both into my home. This is my wife, Margritte.”

He was joined by a fairly attractive woman with auburn hair. When she smiled, her blue eyes sparkled and her cheeks dimpled in a most becoming manner. Will kissed the soft skin on the back of her hand.

“And this is Mr Frederick Persicifolia-Viola.” He gestured to a barrel-chested man who appeared to be in his late forties, with greying black hair and dramatic mutton chops.

“Call me Freddy!” he said cheerfully, coming over to pump Will’s hand up and down. “Bloody mouthful that name is. Here’s the wife too then, how

do you do?”

He grabbed Catherine’s hand and for a moment Will thought he was going to bite it off, but instead he kissed it in a way that made her recoil and left a damp mark on the silk.

“How do you do,” she said as politely as she could in the circumstances.

“M’wife is over there.” He pointed rather rudely at a woman half his size who also looked half his age. “George, come over here, there’s a good girl.”

She glided over gracefully with no embarrassment showing on her delicate features. Her hair was ash-blond, her eyes also blue. She was attractive, but nothing about her appealed to Will. There was something too mask-like about her face.

“I’m Georgiana. *Enchantée*,” she said as Will kissed her hand. He didn’t like the way she smiled at Catherine, as if having decided her superiority over her already.

“Sherry?” Bartholomew offered.

“Please,” he replied.

“I’d like another,” Freddy said, thrusting out his empty glass. “Helps build the appetite, what?”

“Indeed,” Bartholomew replied, his smile perfectly polite.

“So, Aquae Sulis not good enough for the man who destroyed the Rosas, eh?” Freddy swallowed the sherry in one shot and waited for a response, along with everyone else in the room.

“Well, the Season peaked,” Will replied nonchalantly. “After that evening, I knew nothing interesting could possibly happen there for at least another ten years.”

It earned a smile from Tulipa and a guffaw from Viola and he felt the first test had been passed. As he sipped the sherry, he heard the Tulipa wife

complimenting Catherine’s dress, the colour in particular.

The butler announced that dinner was to be served and they went through another set of doors into a dining room, sparkling with silver and crystal but smaller than he expected.

“We prefer to dine in a more intimate space when meeting new friends,” Margritte said, as she guided him gently towards his seat.

The Tulipas were, as hosts should be, seated at either end of the table. Will was placed at Margritte’s right. Georgiana sat on his right, between him and Bartholomew. Freddy dropped into the chair directly opposite him, Catherine to his left and on Bartholomew’s right. He had the feeling she had the worse deal, and didn’t like the fact that she would be under Tulipa’s scrutiny all evening. However, the fact that they had both been placed to the right of the hosts, considered to be the place for honoured guests, was a positive sign.

It started well enough. The soup was good, eliciting a flurry of comments, and wine was served, which distracted people for a few moments.

“So are we to understand that you have taken permanent residence in Londinium?” Georgiana asked.

“That’s right,” Will replied.

“What a difficult time to move here,” Margritte said. “Everyone is still in shock about the Rosas. So many social events have been cancelled.”

“Especially the ones the Rosas were planning.” Freddy emptied his glass before the starter had even been cleared. “Of course, the Agency are having a bloody field day, nicking all their properties and raking it in.”

“Where are you going to be living?” Georgiana asked.

“Lancaster House,” he replied and watched the reactions with interest. Only Bartholomew was truly inscrutable, the rest were both impressed and

envious to varying degrees.

“That’s a beautiful property,” Margritte said.

“What a challenge for a young bride,” said Georgiana, smiling at Catherine.

“The most challenging thing isn’t choosing the new décor,” she said and Will’s stomach tensed. “It’s finding one’s husband when there are so many rooms.”

The ladies tittered. Freddy twisted in his chair to look at her more closely. Will admired the way Catherine ignored his disgraceful behaviour.

“So which family were you from before the Irises got hold of you?” he asked.

“The Rhoeas-Papavers,” she replied.

“Ah, the red poppy lot, yes.” Freddy waved one of the attendants over since his glass remained empty. “Well, the thing you need to know about Londinium is that there’s no Master of Ceremonies or Censor, which means we can have a lot more fun.”

“What Freddy is trying to say,” Georgiana cut in, “is that Londinium is less socially prescriptive than Aquae Sulis.”

“Oh, I don’t believe that for a moment,” Catherine replied and a chill descended over the table. Seeming oblivious as she winkled another sliver of lobster out of its shell, she continued, “It just won’t be so blatant. Every social group has implicit and explicit rules about behaviour, but without a Master and Censor, the most influential of the Ton will control Society instead. It will be just as rigid, only less open.”

She looked up when no one spoke, right at Georgiana. Then she glanced at Will and added, “That’s what my uncle said anyway.”

“Well, he would say that, wouldn’t he dear?” said Margritte. Will gave Catherine as discreet a smile as he could. Good catch, Catherine, he

thought. He noted that their hostess knew Lavandula was her uncle. She'd done her research.

"And your uncle is…?" Freddy asked, who clearly hadn't.

"The Master of Ceremonies," she replied. "He's my mother's brother. Of course he has an opinion on absolutely everything."

She was more able than she thought herself to be. Will felt a rush of relief and hope for the future. If he could just bolster her confidence, she was intelligent enough to be a real asset.

He noticed a look from Bartholomew when she said it. Yes, he thought, that's how I got the property. He could imagine the calculations Bartholomew was making: strong family with wealth on his side, massively influential and powerful uncle and aunt on her side…was he being reconsidered as a threat?

"The city has been shaken to the core by the fall of the Rosas," Bartholomew said. "We're still coming to terms with it all. It's a very uncertain time."

"It's about bloody time if you ask me," Freddy said after tipping the last dregs of the second glass down his throat. "Bloody Roses had their fingers in everything. We couldn't fart without one of them claiming the right to tithe it."

Catherine laughed at that, whilst Margritte took a sudden interest in her wine glass and the slightest sigh escaped from Freddy's wife.

"It will be interesting to see how things settle," Bartholomew said and the third course was brought in.

The conversation skirted around the Rosas a little more before Will gently steered it towards safer topics such as their honeymoon and the delights of London.

“Wonderful place,” Freddy said. “Owe every one of my grey hairs to it. M’wife says I visit it too much but every time I go back there something has changed. Fascinating.” He turned to Catherine. “Soho is a very different place now, of course.”

“Full of media companies and restaurants now, I understand,” she said breezily, but Will noted how Freddy had dabbed at his mouth with the napkin, laid it back down on his lap but not brought his hand back up to his cutlery. Moments later Catherine’s back straightened and her jaw clenched.

Just as Will was about to say something, Freddy sniggered to himself and the left hand came back up to take his fork again. Catherine was frowning at her meal, a gentle flush in her cheeks, and it took everything in him not to yell an accusation at Freddy.

“What exactly is a media company?” Margritte asked.

“Another mundane way to make money out of something utterly incomprehensible,” Georgiana replied.

The conversation then divided. Margritte, Freddy and Georgiana sucked Will into a discussion about what the mundanes got up to in the city, whilst Bartholomew spoke at length with Catherine. Will did his best to maintain a presence in the former whilst listening in on the latter. It seemed mostly about Aquae Sulis at first, and the Lavandula connection, then he heard the names of some composers, and as the meat was served it sounded like they’d moved onto philosophy. Catherine was bright-eyed and animated by the time the fourth course was over. She seemed to be actually enjoying the conversation with the host. Will just prayed she wasn’t saying anything inappropriate.

He suspected she was eager to hold a close conversation with Bartholomew to exclude Freddy as politely as possible. He was gulping

down the wine like a man just rescued from a desert and had the table manners of a goat. How his wife could stand it, he had no idea.

Just as the salads were being served he noticed Freddy's hand below the table again. Margritte was consulting the butler about wine, while Georgiana was drawing Bartholomew's attention away from Catherine, who was also looking at Freddy's hand out of the corner of her eye. Catherine met Will's eyes across the table and he tried to convey that he knew what was happening. Catherine slowly and deliberately looked down at a fork, drawing his gaze. He watched her slide it beneath her napkin and then, with impressive subtlety, lower both below the table line. Freddy was too busy pretending to listen to Margritte to notice what Catherine was doing.

Will considered saying something, but was too captivated by the way Catherine held his eyes. Then, as Freddy's hand moved too far to the left, she raised an eyebrow as if to say, "Speak now or never," and then jabbed the prongs into Freddy's flesh.

He roared and his hand flew upwards, overturning his plate. Will kept his attention on Catherine, who was putting the fork back calmly with a satisfied smile.

"Frederick, really!" Georgiana shrieked. "Whatever is the matter?"

Freddy looked at Catherine, who turned to look at him, the smile not leaving her lips. "Is something wrong?"

"Did you manage to get any sleep?" Petra asked from the doorway as Max discarded the blanket.

"I did, what time is it?"

"Three in the morning. We had to put the gargoyle in the scullery for a few hours, it was wearing the carpet out." She passed him his walking stick.

“I think it was excited. Mr Ekstrand is just fitting it with some new bracers now.”

Max stood, ready for the familiar twinge whenever he moved his leg after a period of rest. “What for? Is something wrong with the old ones?”

“No, I’ll let him explain. He’s waiting for you in his study.”

“Which one?”

“The one he lets people into.”

Max followed her down the hallway, past the assortment of decorated doors and the monitoring room, to one near the end. It was made of plain wood with “Private, no apprentices, no owls” engraved upon it. Max wasn’t aware there’d been any problems with owls. Nothing had filtered through to the Chapter anyway.

Petra knocked. “I have Maximilian with me, Mr Ekstrand,” she called through the wood.

“Bring him in!”

Max followed her, finding the Sorcerer lacing the left bracer of a new set on the gargoyle’s wrist. “Just wait till you see this,” it said with a grin.

“Keep still.” Ekstrand tied the last knot in the leather. “Good. Walk over there.”

He pointed at the far side of the room. On first glance it looked like an average study with its large desk, shelves of books and comfortable chair, but Max’s trained eye spotted the tiny lines of formulae inscribed on the bookshelves and the slight discrepancies in wear indicating there was something concealed beneath the silk rug. The gargoyle walked across the room to the far bookcase. Silently. Over rug, over wooden floorboard, the usual clunking of heavy stone was gone.

Ekstrand beamed and looked at Petra, who rewarded him with a delicate round of applause. The gargoyle appeared to be equally delighted.

“Very useful,” said Max, nodding.

“Well, it is Thursday after all, technically speaking,” Ekstrand said, looking very pleased with himself.

“Now you can take me with you,” the gargoyle said. “When you check out the Agency.”

“I was planning on going alone,” Max said, but Ekstrand shook his head.

“I read your report on what the puppet told us about this Agency. I don’t like it, not one bit. We’re not going to visit these people in the usual way.”

The usual way, the one that Max had been trained in and that had been used by the Chapter for over a thousand years, involved walking up to the residence in question, in either Mundanus or the Nether, and knocking three times slowly whilst wearing the knuckle-duster he always carried in his pocket. Everyone in the Great Families knew what it meant, the rules associated with it and the penalties of refusing access.

“Can I ask why, sir?”

“Something one should never do, when dealing with something completely unknown, is make assumptions,” Ekstrand said. “I too planned to send you there to demand entry and see what in the Worlds they get up to, but when I saw the Tracker’s resting location, and put it together with the facts in the report, I concluded that we cannot assume these people respect the rules.”

“They’re of Society, and therefore not innocents, so they’re still bound by those rules,” Max said. In the Split Worlds there was no such thing as exemption; the Treaty bound Society, the Fae and, in their own way, the Sorcerers.

“But that’s another assumption. Why do we not know about them? Have they deliberately hidden themselves from scrutiny? If so, why? What are

they hiding?”

“You want me to go in covertly?”

“Yes.”

“With a walking gargoyle?”

“Yes. It’s much quieter now, aren’t you?”

The gargoyle nodded earnestly. “And I can hit hard too. Not that we’ll need to hit anyone. Hopefully.”

“And what if we’re discovered?”

“Well, then it’s time to hit them with the full force of the rules and remind them of your status.”

Max nodded, understanding perfectly. Apply the rules when most convenient to him. Not usual, but hardly unheard of. And with no innocents involved, he wasn’t going to argue.

“You said something about the location making you worried. Where will I be going?”

“Three quarters of a mile from the northernmost border of the Heptarchy, near Stirling.”

“It’s an area under dispute, a no-man’s-land,” Petra added. “The Sorcerer of Northumbria still has occasional skirmishes with the King of Caledonia. There’s an uneasy truce that hasn’t been broken for the last century, but neither seems willing to back down over a stretch of land between them.”

“Which just happens to be where the Tracker ended up?” Max asked and both Petra and Ekstrand nodded. “I can see why you’re being cautious, sir. You suspect this Agency might be exploiting the conflict and preventing either side’s claim to win out?”

“Exactly,” Ekstrand said.

“It would be a way to have a location outside any formal jurisdiction,” Petra added. “It would also explain why this Agency has escaped attention for so long.”

“They have enough resources if the puppet is to be believed,” Max added.

“Cathy hasn’t lied to us at any point,” the gargoyle said, eliciting a raised eyebrow from Ekstrand.

“There’s just one issue with this, sir.” Max wanted to keep everything focused on the task ahead rather than on any inappropriate attachments being formed by the gargoyle. “If the Agency is located in a place outside anyone’s jurisdiction, won’t that make it difficult to fall back on the rules if we’re discovered?”

Ekstrand rubbed his chin. “Good point. Better not be detected then, not until we know more about them. They may be utterly harmless, nothing more than a supplier of staff and furniture.”

“You don’t actually believe that, do you?” the gargoyle asked.

“No. Not for a moment. So be on your guard, don’t get caught and if you do…don’t mention me.”

13

Once the roving hand was back in its rightful place, Cathy enjoyed the rest of the meal much more. Bartholomew was every bit the perfect host and she had the feeling he was actually enjoying their conversation. Freddy had laughed outrageously and clapped her on the back as if she were a fellow member of a gentlemen's club. He didn't try to touch her again.

William seemed to approve of her solution to Freddy's behaviour and yet again she found herself noticing how handsome he looked in his smart frock coat and cravat. She endeavoured to focus on Bartholomew for the rest of the evening and, whenever she caught herself glancing through the candlelight to check on William, she reminded herself that falling for her husband would not help her plans to graduate and carve out a career in Mundanus.

Once the dessert dishes were cleared, the last moment Cathy had been dreading arrived: the retirement to the drawing room whilst the men smoked cigars and drank port. With only two other ladies, both of whom knew each other well, Cathy knew there would be a horrible amount of attention focused upon her. She didn't want to make a mess of it, but if she truly didn't care, why be worried?

The lavishly decorated drawing room had chairs that were comfortable enough.

"Now, tell us truthfully," Georgiana said, sitting next to her. "Are you settling in well? Is there anything we can do to help?"

Cathy didn’t believe the offer for a moment. She’d fallen for the same trick played by her sister too many times; Elizabeth would pretend to offer help in order to discover a weakness and then exploit it at the first opportunity.

“That’s very kind,” Cathy replied. “But nothing has proved insurmountable yet.”

“Well, the Agency make it all so easy, don’t they?” Margritte said, sitting opposite them. “As long as one has good taste and a good judge of character, they take care of the rest.”

“They definitely make it easy—easy to be conned,” Cathy said.

“Whatever do you mean?” Georgiana narrowed her eyes and Cathy wondered if she was about to make her first catastrophic mistake of the evening.

Will declined the offer of a cigar, not wanting to reek of smoke in the carriage and give Catherine another excuse to keep him away. He accepted the port with thanks as Freddy stumbled over to a cupboard in the corner of the room. He opened it, and the front of his trousers, and began peeing into the pot within. Freddy couldn’t even do that without grunting like a warthog.

“May I compliment you on your wife, William,” Bartholomew said, port glass in one hand and cigar in the other. He was leaning back in his chair, relaxed and able to speak as if Freddy wasn’t there.

“Thank you.”

“She’s very intelligent. And not afraid to debate. Most refreshing.”

“And good to get a plain one,” Freddy said as he slammed the cupboard shut. He sat down again and tipped his glass back as far as he could to get

every drop of the port.

“What do you mean?” Will asked.

“Good of the family to pair you off with a plain wife. Always better in bed, the plain ones, always so grateful.”

Will set his glass down and was on his feet but Freddy didn’t notice with his head still tipped back, looking up at the chandelier as he waved his empty glass around.

“Better than being saddled with a beauty,” he drawled. “They’re so demanding.”

“I say, sir.” Will, not getting a response from Freddy, turned to the host. “I must protest.”

“Must you? What? Why?” Freddy tipped himself upright again. Some drool was shining in his muttonchops and his eyes were unfocused. “Barty, what’s he all worked up about?”

“My apologies, William,” Bartholomew said, raising a hand slightly to assure him it was under control. “Frederick, it’s time for you to go home.”

“Really? Haven’t started playing cards yet though.”

“It’s time,” Bartholomew said firmly.

“Oh.” Freddy looked remorseful. “Have I caused offence, old chap?”

“You have indeed, sir. I demand an apology,” Will replied.

“You have it, old boy! I lose my tongue sometimes and I mean no harm, no harm at all. And your wife is a delightfully spirited filly, I’ll wager she __”

“Frederick.” Bartholomew cut him off with an imperious bark. “Get his cloak and gloves,” he said to the butler and then to Will, “Please accept my apologies too.”

Will gave a curt nod and sat back down as Freddy struggled to his feet.

“Where’s m’wife?” he slurred.

Will watched him with disgust, realising that it wasn't just form that had elicited his protest. He'd felt genuinely affronted.

"And by questioning his calculations I saved the household over one hundred thousand of the Queen's pounds per year."

The ticking of the clock seemed very loud. Both Margritte and Georgiana were speechless, making that awful nervous giggle build in Cathy's throat as the two women looked at each other. Cathy wondered if there was a social equivalent of chicken being played out silently in front of her. Who would react first? And which way should it go?

"They're exploiting the fact we would never talk openly about this kind of thing," she went on, trying to tip the tension over into something in her favour. "And whilst I may have committed a faux pas in being so truthful about it, I hope you see that it's in our best interests to do so. They have a monopoly so they feel they can bully us into doing things the way they want, but it shouldn't be that way."

"Monopoly?" Georgiana asked.

"They're the only service provider. They know there's no other agency for us to go to, so we feel we have to keep them happy. It all happens subliminally in the social setting, and then, when the meeting's over, everything's geared up to make it difficult, and embarrassing to ask questions or make complaints, do you see?"

"I do!" Margritte said, and slapped her closed fan against her palm. "Georgiana, don't pull that face, she's right! We shouldn't let pride interfere with common sense."

"The thing about common sense," Georgiana began in a tone that reminded Cathy of a character in an Oscar Wilde play, "is that—"

The door opened and the butler appeared. “Begging your pardon, milady, but Mr Viola has asked for his wife. I understand he’s about to leave.”

“Oh, he’s drunk and belligerent again.” Georgiana sighed as she stood up. “Really, the man is insufferable.”

She spoke only to Margritte, as if she’d forgotten Cathy was there. The hostess didn’t look surprised and gave Georgiana a sympathetic smile. Hasty goodbyes were made and she left, the sounds of her husband’s bellowing echoing down the hallway.

“Does that often happen?” Cathy asked and Margritte nodded. “Then why do people still invite him? In Aquae Sulis he’d never see the inside of another person’s dining room ever again.”

“Well,” Margritte said, sitting back down and inviting Cathy to do the same, “it’s probably because he’s disgustingly rich.”

Cathy laughed at her plain speaking and Margritte smiled. “Catherine, I believe you may be just the breath of fresh air the Londinium salons need. I would be delighted if you could come to a soirée we’re planning for a week from now. Something gentle to get people back into the mood again after all of this upheaval.”

“Thank you, that’s very kind.”

“Seeing as the Violas have left, perhaps we should rejoin our husbands and play a game of cards a little earlier than usual. I’m sure Bartholomew won’t mind—he seemed quite taken with you, and your husband is a delight.”

“A delight?” She was about to make a comment about telling him that later when she felt the strangest sensation, deep in her stomach, as if she had just been in a very fast lift and reached the top floor.

“Yes, don’t you agree?”

“Well…” It happened again and she gripped the edge of the sofa, squeezing her eyes shut against a pulse of vertigo.

“Oh, my dear, are you feeling unwell?”

“I do feel a little odd.”

“Catherine?” William was at the doorway. Bartholomew was already in the room, though she hadn’t noticed him enter. “Are you all right?”

“I’m so sorry,” she said to the hosts, “but would you mind if we—” She stopped, the vertigo making her feel like she was about to fall off the sofa, this time accompanied by a twinge in her left hand.

“I’d like to take Catherine home. Will you permit me to thank you for a most pleasant evening?” William said as he crossed the room to her side.

She took his hands gratefully as the worst of the latest wave faded. He helped her to stand and she hoped she wasn’t going to make a habit of fainting in his arms. That would just be too much.

“It was a pleasure to meet you both,” Bartholomew said. “Catherine, I do hope you feel better soon.”

After a flurry of capes and hats, Cathy found herself in the carriage once more. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me, I’ve never been like this…must be married life.” There was another awful lurch in her stomach. “Oh, God, do you think it was the lobster? I can’t stand being sick. Do you feel strange?”

He moved across to put his arm around her. She found it comforting and then tried to ignore it.

“I know what it is,” he said, resting a hand over hers and kissing her gently on the cheek.

“If you say it’s something to do with starting to fall in love I swear I will vomit all over you.”

He pulled a face. “Good grief, Catherine, you do say the most awful things. Does your stomach feel like it wants to move in the opposite direction to where you’re going?” When she nodded he said, “And you feel dizzy, it comes in waves and there’s…a tension, underneath it all?” She nodded again. “You’re not ill. You’re being summoned.”

“That sounds bad,” she whispered. The rocking of the carriage was making the vertigo worse. “What does it mean?”

“Lord Iris wants to see you.”

She felt a lot worse. “You’re saying he’s doing this? How can he make me feel ill?”

He brushed her wedding ring with his index finger. “I’m sorry. It must be this. You’re an Iris now.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, this just keeps getting worse! What else does this bloody ring do? Suck my soul out?”

“I don’t think it does anything else. And whilst I understand your distress, please don’t use that language.”

“Sorry,” she whispered. “I’m upset. Hang on, you know how it feels… it’s happened to you?”

“Once, just before I left on the Grand Tour. He wanted to speak to me.”

“And you felt like this until you saw him?”

“If you speak his name and say you’re on your way, it eases, for a time.”

Feeling foolish, and distinctly unsettled, she said, “Lord Iris, I’m on my way.”

The tug in her gut disappeared and her head cleared.

“Better?” he asked.

“Will he hear what I’m saying now?”

William shrugged. “He’s very powerful, but I don’t know if it works like that. I imagine he’s able to detect your desire to comply with his wishes.”

He didn’t move his hand when hers formed into a fist. “I don’t know how you can bear it. This is worse than being a Poppy. All those years I thought it was hell but even when I was locked in that damn room I had more freedom than this.” She caught the build-up to a rant and shut up. “I’m feeling better. You can let go now.”

“I don’t want to.” He smiled. “I wanted to say how impressed I was.”

“The food was very nice. Now, please, go and sit over there for goodness’ sake.”

He did so, but only after another kiss, its gentleness at odds with the fury she was trying to contain. She wanted to rant and rave and punch the seat cushions, cursing Iris and the entirety of Society, but he was so happy it felt absurd to show any of it.

“I wasn’t impressed with the food, but with you.” He slid down in the seat; it was the first time she could remember him seeming even remotely relaxed. “All that worry and you impressed them immensely, particularly Bartholomew.”

“You don’t mind that I stuck a fork in one of the guests?”

“Absolutely not. Freddy deserved it, disgusting man. If you hadn’t handled it yourself I would have had to call him out. I almost did when we were having the port.” He looked distant for a moment, his brow furrowed and cheeks pink. “He did howl though, didn’t he?” He laughed.

The rage tipped over and she burst into laughter too as she recalled Freddy’s roar. The carriage filled with the sound of the two of them laughing.

“Why do you think Lord Iris wants to see me?” she said once they’d settled down.

“I have no idea.”

“Have I done something wrong?”

“Not in my eyes. The only thing we need to do is make a go of it. I think it really could work between us, do you see? You’re clever, you’re funny, when you’re not being irritating or offensive, that is.” He said it with a smile. “I felt proud of you this evening. Bartholomew complimented you most highly. I think that’s an achievement in and of itself.”

She felt a quickening in her chest: excitement. This is what it was to get it right, then, the feeling that Elizabeth must have had countless times in her life, one that until now had been alien to her. Feeling her cheeks grow hot, Cathy couldn’t look at him as she tried to hold onto the feeling before it was destroyed by someone or something. Her gaze drifted downwards and she saw the ring, the thing they’d forced onto her, the tiny chains about her all held in that single band.

She was disgusted with herself. One taste of success, one bit of praise and she was ready to delude herself into thinking it actually meant anything other than the reinforcement of her slavery.

“What?” he asked.

“I nearly fell for it,” she said. “I nearly started to think like they do.”

He massaged his temples. “Why does it all have to be so complicated? Has it occurred to you that Londinium may just suit you in a way Aquae Sulis never could? Can’t you appreciate that what happened this evening was a triumph and let yourself feel good about it?”

“Obtaining your approval, and that of Society, is not something I ever want to aspire to, so I shouldn’t let it feel good when I get it.”

He groaned, throwing his hands into the air. “You are simply determined to be unhappy!”

“You’re determined to mould me into something I’m not. You and Iris, no doubt.” She felt a flicker of anxiety at the thought of him.

“I know you’re afraid.” He reached across, but she pulled her hands back and he withdrew. “I was, when I had to go to him.”

His unrelenting kindness irritated her. “I don’t even know how to get into Exilium.”

“Now you’ve been summoned, all you need to do is stand in front of a mirror, alone, and speak his name three times.” William’s voice was quiet and his fingers were laced tightly together.

“You’re worried too,” she said.

“Of course I am,” he snapped. “You’re my wife.”

The words were like a slap. She sank into silence, oscillating between the desire to scream and the need to weep with fear. She hated the feeling of being like a cork bobbing in the ocean, lifted up and down by them all.

“He’s very precise,” William said after a while. “He won’t accept anything less than total obedience and deference. Your manners must be impeccable.”

“All right.”

“You don’t need to pretend to be delighted about the marriage, not in the way Lord Poppy seemed to want you to be at the Oak. I think it’s irrelevant to our patron. All that matters is that you do as you’re told, regardless of how you feel about it.”

“My father would approve,” she said, wondering whether he’d had any idea of the life he’d forced her into. Not that it would have changed anything.

“And I assume you know not to eat or drink anything, and to be wary of __”

“I know how to survive in Exilium.”

“Good. You should go there as soon as we’re home. And wear that dress. You look very fine in it.”

She felt remorseful then, for throwing everything back in his face all the time. “Thank you,” she said, but he just looked out of the window. Perhaps he was right, perhaps she could make a go of it in Society, if that evening was anything to go by. She had actually started to relax in Margritte’s company and was sad to leave so suddenly. But was it even possible to make a friend in the Nether?

14

Sam scratched his neck and felt the stubble. He'd been wearing the same clothes for three days, hadn't left the house in the last four and was watching daytime television. He grabbed the remote and killed the show. His life was never going to be enriched by a discussion about which man had fathered which baby. "You slob," he said to himself.

He got up and stretched, doing his best to ignore the pile of unopened post he'd dumped on the chair. It had been building up for a while and yet he just couldn't face opening it. He was supposed to call an estate agent, probably at least three, and get the house on the market but he couldn't face that either.

He trudged up the stairs, peed and stood in front of the sink, trying to muster the energy to have a shave. He was out of routine and with no job; being clean-shaven had lost its importance.

He pulled a stray hair from the sink as he revisited over and over again in his memory the moment of being sacked. He couldn't deny that his work had suffered and important deadlines had been missed. He hadn't argued when his boss had accused him of being irresponsible and neglectful and letting the rest of the team down. It was all true. He just didn't care anymore.

He'd packed up his personal belongings, said goodbye to Dave, who was too shocked to insult him, and came home. That first day he hardly moved as he tried to work out when exactly he'd stopped caring.

He wondered if Exilium had done it. After seeing a place like that, its colours and beauty, everything else had felt dull in comparison. But his memories of the place had already faded again, like the places he'd visited as a backpacking student.

"You're a slob and terrible husband," he said to the grotty face in the mirror. He'd been unemployed for less than a week and already looked like he'd never earned an honest wage in his life. He still hadn't told Leanne either.

He shaved and showered. By the time he was towelling himself off he felt a little better. He'd decided he should make the most of the time, eat better, get a little exercise. At least he didn't have to serve out a tedious notice period. He put the toilet seat down and sat in the steam, shaking his head. Who was he trying to kid? He felt like shit.

His mobile phone rang and he reached it just in time. "Lee?"

"Hi, Sam."

He checked his watch. Eleven thirty in the morning. "You OK? Has something happened?"

"I called your work phone."

"Oh."

"Dave said you've been sacked."

He chucked the towel on the bed and sat on top of it. For a few seconds there was no sound except the pattering of drips on the carpet. "Yeah, about that…I was waiting till I saw you."

Her high heels were clicking down a corridor, then there was the quiet squeak of a door opening and it sounded less echoey. "When did it happen?"

"Couple of days ago."

"And you didn't tell me?"

“Like I said, I was waiting till I saw you this weekend.”

“Are you going to move to London now?”

“I…” He didn’t know what to say. He couldn’t explain that he was waiting for an Arbiter’s report on her boss, the company she worked for and the dodgy apartment they’d given her.

“Have you at least got the house on the market?”

“Well, the thing is—”

“I don’t think you want to move to London. I’m beginning to think you don’t want to be with me anymore.”

“I came to see you, didn’t I? I wanted to talk but you just kept—”

“I’ve had enough.”

“Of what?”

“This. Us, the marriage. You’re not committed, you—”

“*I’m* not committed? You’re the one who moved to London at the drop of a hat!”

“I want a separation. This hasn’t been working for a long time and we’ve both been deluding ourselves. You don’t want to live with me anymore, otherwise you’d have jumped at the chance to move up here sooner.”

“Bloody hell, it’s been two days! I needed to come to terms with it.”

“What’s there to come to terms with? You were going to hand your notice in anyway, weren’t you?”

He paused. He hadn’t planned to do that. He hadn’t planned any of it, not the Fae, not the Fool’s Charm, not the kidnapping or the weird wedding-ring business, none of it. The sharp pitch of her voice reminded him of the new Leanne, the skinny, driven, joyless woman he’d barely recognised at the flat. Why bother to fight for the marriage anymore?

“If that’s what you want,” he said and she ended the call. He listened to the silence for a moment, then let his hand drop to his lap and the phone slide to the floor.

The wedding band tingled as Cathy approached the mirror. William watched from the doorway to their bedroom. She looked at him as she spoke Lord Iris’s name three times, making the glass ripple, and then Exilium was revealed in its hyper-coloured glory.

“Good luck,” he mouthed silently.

The worry in his eyes made her hesitate and the tingling strengthened until it became uncomfortable. She stepped through, taking the hint. The trees of Lord Iris’s domain were straight in front of her, which reduced the risk of running into Lord Poppy. She breathed in through her nose, released the breath slowly out of her mouth to steady herself, and then walked forwards.

Just like Poppy’s domain there was a path leading deeper into the copse. The trees were more densely packed the further in she went, making it feel more like a tunnel. Soon she caught sight of splashes of iris blue, then some of the flowers edged the path. As she passed, the blooms turned as if they were watching her. She tried not to think about that.

She expected to reach a clearing, but instead the path led to a structure made of saplings. They’d been woven into a complex latticework half-dome, its apex twice the height of her. Lord Iris was seated within it on a chair carved out of a large tree stump. His long white hair was perfectly straight and his eyes the same blue as the flowers surrounding them, freakish in their lack of pupil, iris and humour, just a solid blue. He wore a black frock coat and trousers, very similar in cut to what William had been

wearing that evening. His waistcoat was embroidered with golden thread, each tiny iris flower beaded and sparkling with the small amount of sunlight that reached them.

Cathy shivered under his gaze, dropped into a deep curtsy immediately and waited to be invited closer. Again, all of the flowers were turned towards her and she felt as if she were being watched by dozens of creatures, not one Fae lord.

“Come here.” It was the first time she’d heard his voice and there was no warmth in it. At the wedding, he’d spoken only with Lord Poppy and the Patroons.

She straightened herself and walked forwards. He watched her with a terrible intensity. When she was a few feet away she slowed, now beneath the half-dome, but he pointed to a spot just in front of him. She clenched her chattering teeth and moved closer until she was mere inches from his hand. It felt too close. He looked down at the ground beneath his finger most deliberately and she realised he expected her to kneel. She planted her left knee exactly where he pointed and knelt on ground soft with fallen leaves.

Now she would have to look up to his face, which was of course what he wanted. There was none of the chaotic danger she felt around Poppy—instead she felt chilled to her core. If he carried on staring at her like that he would bleach the colour from her hair as well as her cheeks.

“Your hand,” he said, pointing to her left.

She extended it towards him, trying to stop it from quivering. He mimed turning it palm up, which she did and he slid his hand beneath it until her wrist rested on his palm. His cold fingers curled around it. All of the tiny hairs on her body stood on end as he touched her and her heartbeat went from fast to frantic. His thumb curled until it was a couple of inches above

her pulse point, then the nail elongated and sharpened into a talon. She gasped and reflexively pulled her hand away but his grip tightened just as quickly, his fingers holding her fast.

“Look at me.” She forced herself to look into the intense blue, feeling the deep primal fear of being exposed to something so alien. “You are one of mine now,” he said. “Poppy no longer holds dominion over your blood and bones.”

She was certain he could feel her shivering. “Yes, my lord,” she stammered. What else could she say?

“In all the time I have known Poppy, one as plain as you has never caught his eye, let alone stolen his affection. Never have I seen him so enthralled by such an unremarkable creature. There’s only one conclusion to be reached: you’re not as unremarkable as you appear to be.”

“Or…” Cathy ventured, “he could be mistaken, and his affection misplaced.”

“I did not invite you to speak,” he said. “Poppy may have delighted in your opinion, but I am not he. You are here to answer my questions. Do you understand?”

“Yes, my Lord.” She spoke with as much deference as she could but it had never come easily to her.

“Why did Poppy value you so highly?”

The last thing Cathy wanted to do was tell the truth, but she didn’t know if she could bear to lie under his scrutiny. “I impressed him, my Lord. And amused him.”

“How did you impress him?”

“I…I managed to humiliate a Rosa.”

A tiny movement at her wrist tore her eyes from his; the thumbnail was closer to her skin. “How?”

“By helping a mundane man beat him in a duel.”

“A Rosa duelling a mundane? What precipitated this?”

She hesitated, and the talon moved closer. “A wish I made, my Lord. It resulted in the Rosa losing a mundane woman he’d been promised. But it wasn’t my fault.”

“Who granted you a wish?”

“Lord Poppy.”

“Only one?”

She could hear the shortness of her breath as the nail moved closer. “Three, my Lord. I was tasked to impress him with my choices, which I did.”

“You told me humiliating the Rosa impressed him.”

“It…it was complicated.” She struggled to speak, the fear tightening her throat as the nail hovered above the vein. It was dark blue and she could see her pulse making the skin quiver up and down.

“Poppy was never complicated. He hasn’t granted any of his pets three wishes for five generations. Why give them to you?”

“A whim?” She didn’t want to reveal what had really caught Poppy’s eye.

The nail touched the skin, as sharp as a pin, making her jolt and the breath fly from her lungs. She couldn’t take her eyes off it and felt his intense focus on the top of her head. As the seconds passed the pressure increased, so slight she thought she was imagining it, then she saw the skin being pushed inwards and the pain increased.

“I asked to go to university at my coming of age,” she blurted, but the pressure didn’t ease. “And then I ran away from my family and lived in Mundanus.” She felt the skin break. “I hid from them for over a year,” she cried as a deep-red bead rose and started to trickle up the nail in a most

unnatural way. “I hid from Poppy too until he found me, I don’t know how!”

The blood ran back down the nail, pooling where its sharp tip was still pressed. Her heartbeat was roaring in her ears, she could feel sweat rolling down her back and she shook violently. It was hardly a wound, yet she felt as much distress as if it had been a knife driven deep.

“Always better to tell me the truth as soon as you speak.” He tilted his head, studying her discomfort. “Such fragile reluctance…” The nail drove deeper and the bead of blood elongated into a narrow rivulet, sliding down the side of her wrist onto his fingers. “There is something you cling to, a vain hope perhaps.”

He squeezed and she cried out in pain, frustrated by her impotence and enraged by his casual cruelty.

“That’s better,” he said. “I can hear your secret now. Did you really think that learning of your little rebellion would concern me? Did your family lock you away once you were returned?”

She nodded, watching the blood and wanting to run.

“And you think that now I know your plan to do it again, I’ll do the same?”

She looked up from the nail to his eyes, closer than they were before. How did he know? A good guess?

“A mortal says so much when in crisis, and they rarely use words,” he whispered, answering her silent question. “Answer me.”

“Yes,” she said, doing everything she could to hold in the gathering tears.

“And that hope endures even after I summoned you. I have no concern about your fantasy, for that’s all it can be now. You felt my summons. There is no magic in the Split Worlds that can hide you from me, should I discover

you've disobeyed your new family." The fingers holding her wrist curled and she saw their nails growing too, felt them prickle her skin but not pierce it yet. "But now we have met, I'm sure you are more keen to please my family."

"Yes, yes, of course," she said and screamed when the four other points drew blood.

"Not very intelligent. Lie to me again and I will write this lesson into your flesh with scars only you can see."

Tears splattered on the leaves in front of her. "I'm sorry," she whispered.

"There's something Lord Poppy holds over you. He mentions it when we see each other. He seems to think he still has some claim to you. Is there a contract between you?"

"He…he made me promise to paint him the best picture of my generation."

"You're an artist?"

"No, my Lord, but my third wish was to reach my full potential. After I made it, he told me to find paints and canvasses." She didn't mention the new deadline, fearing she'd suck Sam into Lord Iris's schemes as well as Poppy's.

He looked at her, *into* her. She shut her eyes, the urge to withdraw too strong for a moment, but she could still see them, like twin blue suns burnt into her retina. When she looked again his left hand was reaching towards her head and she twitched fearfully.

Lord Iris plucked out a hair—the brief sting barely registered above the pain in her wrist—and then tipped his head back and dangled the hair into his mouth like a length of spaghetti. He closed his lips around it and pulled it back up and out as if he was sucking something off it. As the strand

emerged, no hint of the natural brown remained. He let go when the entire white length was free of his lips and the strand became a powdery dust that drifted to the forest floor.

“Lord Poppy may be mercurial, but he’s no fool,” he said, taking her chin and directing her attention back to him. “Now I know what it was he saw in you, and it was not artistic talent. There’s no capacity for art within you. Even if you struggled for years you would produce nothing more than the mediocre.” His thin lips formed a smile. “Very clever. I won’t underestimate him again.” Still holding her chin, he tipped her head back slightly, exposing her throat, then moved her from side to side, taking in every detail of her face.

As his words penetrated her fear, she wanted to ask questions and demand to know what her potential was if not artistic in nature. Why had Poppy lied? But she didn’t dare open her mouth, especially with her wrist still skewered.

“How many days have passed in Mundanus since the wedding?”

“Four, my lord.” And she still hadn’t had a chance to find someone to teach her how to paint. If the Shopkeeper’s special Charm didn’t arrive in time—

“Instead of hankering for a life that’s not yours to lead, obey your husband and focus on how to serve me to the best of your ability. As for this painting nonsense, your loyalty is to me now, not Poppy. Now it’s time for you to go back and be a *good wife*.” He punctuated the last words with a slight squeeze of the nails into her skin, before releasing her.

She swayed, the blood tickling her wrist as it flowed from the puncture wounds. Fearing he would be angry if she soiled her dress, she struggled to her feet, holding her arm out at the side. She curtsied inelegantly and then

backed away, head still bowed, like a medieval courtier knowing better than to turn her back on the King.

When Lord Iris looked away it felt so different to be free of his intense stare. She reached the edge of the clearing, turned and hurried along the path, grateful to see a Way open before she even got to the edge of the copse. She could see the bedroom and staggered through, lightheaded and clumsy.

“Catherine!” William had waited the whole time, out of sight from Exilium. “My God.” He paled as he took in the blood, grabbed a neatly folded handkerchief from his pocket and rushed to her side.

“Go away.” She glanced back to see the Way closing. She sank to her knees, her legs too watery to stand. William knelt in front of her, wrapped the silk around her wrist and pressed tight.

“What happened?” he asked, but she couldn’t speak. He drew her into an embrace and she pushed at his chest briefly then accepted the comfort. She sobbed into his frock coat, the two of them kneeling on the floor of the bedroom.

After a few minutes the worst of it was over. Her wrist throbbed dreadfully beneath his makeshift bandage and the hand that was still wrapped tightly around it. His other hand was rubbing her back gently as he reassured her she was safe.

She pulled back until she could see his face, ashamed to be snivelling like a child. He wiped away a tear with a thumb and stroked the back of her neck before kissing her on the forehead. “You need tea, and a rest,” he said, in such a gentle voice she started to weep again. “And we should put a proper bandage on this.”

“God, what is wrong with me?” She sniffed. “Honestly, William, I’m not like this.”

“Shush, I don’t mind, it must have been terrifying. Did Lord Iris do this?”

She nodded. “To make me talk about Poppy.” The words unravelled as her chest heaved and the memory brought fresh tears with it.

“You’re home now,” he said, kissing her forehead again. “Let me take care of you. You’ve had a terrible shock.”

“I don’t want to—”

“For God’s sake, Cathy,” he said, standing and picking her up to carry her to the bed. “Stop fighting for just five minutes, will you?”

She rolled onto her side and curled as much as she could in her evening gown. She cradled her injury as he pulled the bell cord and then slipped her shoes off her feet. It felt too intimate and too demeaning to be cared for like this, like a wife. She should be keeping him at arm’s length and the barriers up but she was so tired and wrung out she said nothing.

“Can you tell me what he said?”

“I don’t want to think about it.” She started to shiver again.

He sat next to her, stroking the wayward strands of hair away from her face. Where did he learn this compassion? How could he be capable of kindness, coming from a family so rigidly controlled and so cold?

He let her eyes search his, seeming happy for the moment to stretch. He gave the butler instructions for tea and the medical box to be brought, his hand never leaving her hair.

“I promised you I’d find a way to make this life bearable,” he said. “I haven’t forgotten that.”

She thought of ten different ways to shoot his words down but spoke none of them. She could feel herself drawing inwards, no fight left. Iris had made it clear he could summon her back even if she did find a way back to

her mundane life. There was no hope of escape any more, and, without that, what was there to push against? “You called me Cathy,” she whispered.

“Do you mind if I do?”

“No. Only the people I hate most in the Worlds call me Catherine.”

His smile was beautiful. “Then call me Will.” The butler returned with a box and a maid set tea out on a nearby table. Will sent them both away. “I shall now impress you with my bandaging skills,” he announced, opening the box. “All you need to do is watch with admiration and be thankful that Oliver Peonia is one of the clumsiest companions one could ever have on a Grand Tour.”

She managed a smile, even though she could see his false cheeriness was just a means of covering up his fear. But wasn’t that what they were all condemned to do with patrons such as theirs?

15

The Way closed behind them and Max shivered in the cold air of Mundanus. They were standing at the bottom of a hill and the lights of Stirling cast an orange glow on the distant cloud base. The bitter wind blasted through his coat, and he fastened the top button and pulled the compass out of his pocket. As his eyes adapted to the darkness he could just make out the needle's gentle glow.

"The Tracker should be at the top of the hill," he said to the gargoyle.

They both looked up and saw nothing but different shades of black. "I'll go and have a look," the gargoyle offered and Max nodded. He didn't want to struggle up a grassy slope with his walking stick unless absolutely necessary.

The gargoyle bounded off like an eager dog that had been shut indoors all day. Max quickly lost sight of it so he turned his collar up against the wind and looked at the town's lights. The gargoyle returned swiftly.

"We got a problem."

"Guards? Magical defences?"

"No. There's nothing there."

He checked the compass needle again. "The Tracker is up there somewhere. Are you sure?"

"Come up and see for yourself."

It was slow going and the gargoyle got more and more frustrated as the climb went on but Max went as fast as his aching leg would allow. At the summit there was nothing but a strengthening of the wind. Leaning on the

stick as the gargoyle snuffled about, Max examined the needle and slowly closed in on the Tracker's location.

"Why are you doing that?" he asked the gargoyle. "Can you even smell anything?"

"I don't know," it replied. "I get this urge to sniff at things. It's been coming on stronger lately."

"Have you told the Sorcerer?"

"No." They looked at each other for a moment. "Do you think we should?"

"I've found it," Max said, distracted by the needle spinning round. "Have a dig about here, will you?"

The gargoyle did as it was asked and Max pulled out a penlight torch. He pointed it where the gargoyle rooted in the grass and a sparkle ended the search. The gargoyle scooped out a divot and handed it to Max.

Max plucked the Tracker from the clod of earth. It looked like a tiny clockwork ladybird with a brass shell. Max dropped the compass in a pocket and rummaged in another for his jeweller's loupe. He tucked it under his right eyebrow to inspect the details.

"It's a wonder you don't clank like a tinker's cart with all that stuff in your pockets."

Max ignored the gargoyle as he checked the Tracker was still intact, then inserted the tiny key he'd been given, which looked like a pin to the naked eye. The Tracker's shell opened and the workings inside looked in order as far as he could tell. Nothing was broken; it all seemed to be in the right place and when he pressed the minute nubbin at the heart of the workings with the key the six legs-cum-hooks extended and retracted exactly as they should.

Trackers were used for covert ops. They were designed to hook into clothing, or even sometimes into the hair of an animal, and stay hidden to monitor the movement of the target in and between Mundanus and the Nether. The formulae, too tiny for Max to read even with the loupe, could be altered to effectively programme the Tracker to alert the Chapter to whatever variable they needed. This Tracker had been set to wait for the target to stay in a location for more than three hours, then detach, leave the building and slip back into Mundanus to send a signal by arcane means beyond Max's understanding. Ekstrand told him that wherever the Tracker was would be less than two metres from the anchor property, but the top of the hill was devoid of any structures at all.

"Don't blame this on Cathy," the gargoyle said.

"I wasn't even thinking about her."

"You were about to. She wouldn't have screwed up with the Tracker, I know she wouldn't."

"Why are you so keen to defend her?"

"Because no one else will."

"I'm not sure she'd appreciate that. She seems capable of fighting her own corner."

The gargoyle wrinkled its muzzle. Max focused back on the Tracker. There was no way to tell if it had failed or not, so he closed it up again and put it into the pouch Ekstrand had given him to bring it back safely.

"What do we do now?" the gargoyle asked.

"We could go back to Ekstrand and verify if the Tracker failed," Max said, "but we'd miss the perfect time to look around. Everyone will be asleep now. So, let's assume it has worked but has ended up further away from the anchor property than it should have."

“Maybe it mostly worked, then crapped out at the last moment,” the gargoyle suggested.

“The Tracker couldn’t have moved all the way up here, to the other side of the country and outside of the Heptarchy, all by itself.”

“Perhaps the guy found it and attached it to something else to lead us to the wrong place.”

“That’s possible. Or he could have come through the Nether to a place in Stirling and walked up here to dump the device. I doubt that.”

“Maybe they were watching the hill, saw me and thought, ‘Bloody hell! A walking gargoyle! I’m not touching this with a six-foot bargepole,’ and went home again.”

“Perhaps…” Max looked around the hill. “But why here?”

“No witnesses.”

“True. But what if the Tracker did work? Ekstrand was right when he talked about assumptions. We’re assuming that, just because we can’t see an anchor property, there isn’t one here. What if there’s a place hidden inside this hill?”

The gargoyle grinned. “I like it. Where shall we start?”

Max pointed to a spot close to where the Tracker was found and shone the torch at it. The gargoyle started gouging out huge clumps of earth until there was a scrape of stone against stone. “Found something!”

Max directed the torch beam, peered in and saw a large block, buried. “Dig around it a bit, see if you can work out some dimensions.”

The gargoyle dug a shallow trench quickly, exposing more of the stone and a couple of new ones. Max inspected them. “This isn’t the top of a bunker,” he said as the gargoyle groaned with disappointment. “These are old foundations. There was probably a fort here a long time ago. That disproves my theory.”

The gargoyle shook its head. “I’ve got a feeling there’s something here.”

“You just don’t want to go back to the Sorcerer and admit defeat.”

“No, it’s not that.” It dug another couple of feet down. “You got that Peeper you used on the stolen house in Aquae Sulis?”

“Of course.”

“Use it on this stone.”

“Don’t be daft.”

“It’ll only take two minutes.”

Max shrugged, located the Peeper and gave it to the gargoyle. “Let’s see if you can use it,” he suggested, not wanting to struggle down onto his belly and lay his leg against damp, cold earth.

The gargoyle nestled down in the hollow and pressed the Peeper up against the stone.

“You’ll have to adjust the lens to cope with the thickness of the stone,” Max instructed.

“I know.”

Max expected the Peeper to detach after alignment, as it would with any mundane surface without a Nether property anchored to it. Then they’d be left with no choice but to force the puppet to reveal how she’d stayed hidden.

“There’s something there!”

“A bunker?” Max asked.

“No, I can see the floor, this is at ground level. The room goes up about another eight feet.”

It made no sense; the gargoyle was looking through the side of the stone as if it formed a wall, not a ceiling. “But that’s impossible, there’s nothing above that stone for a room to be anchored to.”

“Come and look for yourself.”

The gargoyle helped Max to lie down and the cold penetrated his clothes immediately, making him all the more aware of the stubborn ache in his leg. Max peered through the circular device and saw a polished wooden floor stretching ahead of him. There was a row of desks, like an office rather than a schoolroom, and filing cabinets lined one of the walls, with shelves and shelves of huge ledgers above them. It was all visible thanks to the familiar pale grey light of the Nether. Max noted the lack of curtains on the windows. It wasn’t like a private residence where heavy drapes were used to give the illusion of day and night. It looked like whoever worked in that room still kept a day/night schedule, however, because all the chairs were neatly tucked under the desks and it was empty of staff.

The gargoyle was right; the stone formed part of an anchor wall, close to the floor, but only the foundation seemed to remain in Mundanus. He’d never seen or heard of anything like it before. In fact, he wasn’t sure how it was possible. Buildings owned by the puppets could only exist if anchored to a property in Mundanus. The cloisters that housed each of the Chapters were sometimes combinations of several reflections, but all of the parts were still anchored to a physical property in Mundanus. As far as he knew, the Fae were incapable of doing the same and the Sorcerers had taken great care to ensure it remained that way.

Had a Sorcerer revealed a secret technique? With the corruption in London the Sorcerer of Essex was the prime suspect. But why provide the Agency with that knowledge? If it became widely available to the puppets it could undermine most of the techniques used by the Arbiters to keep close tabs on Fae-touched society.

“This is big, isn’t it?”

“It’s big,” Max said and detached the Peeper. “Just goes to show that it pays to be thorough.”

“How do we get in?”

Max got the Opener and pushed the pin into the place the Peeper had been, the powerful formulae making it as easy as pushing a stick into mud. He twisted it and watched the familiar burning outline of the doorway form in the stone. He expected it to fail once it tried to progress past the stone but instead the outline continued upwards, as if a thin line of the air itself began to burn. The doorway formed just as it would have if the anchor property had been there. Max made mental notes of the details as the gargoyle jumped up and down, gushing about how it hadn’t expected that and how exciting it all was. Max found it hard to believe it really was his soul trapped inside it.

The door formed. Max opened it and pulled out the Opener. He let it close behind him once the gargoyle was inside too. At least it had the sense to shut up.

The air inside the room had the familiar staleness of any Nether property. Max went to the one internal door that led to the rest of the house and gestured to the gargoyle to stay out of sight should anyone be walking past outside. It dropped low on all fours and slunk between the tables to lie beneath one of the large sash windows.

Max listened for movement on the other side of the door but all he could hear was the ticking of the clock above his head.

“I think they’re all asleep,” he whispered to the gargoyle.

“We should go outside, see what the whole place looks like,” it replied. “These windows are too big for a fort, I want to see what kind of a building it is, and how big.”

Max shook his head. “We only do that if we have time. We need to prioritise finding the information about the Rosas.”

He went to the nearest filing cabinet. There was a small card in the holder on the first drawer he came to, with the letters “Y—Z” written on neatly. Max walked down the row to the one with “Ra—Re” written on it and moved down the drawers until he got to one labelled “Rosa”. It made sense that one of the largest family lines should have an entire drawer dedicated to them.

He glanced up at the shelves above the filing cabinet and saw “Rosa” plus a range of numerals inscribed on the spines. “Come and get one of those down,” he said to the gargoyle, pointing at a ledger on the nearest shelf. “Look through and tell me what’s recorded in them.”

He opened the drawer as the gargoyle did as it was told. It was stuffed with files, all labelled with names in alphabetical order, making locating the Gallica-Rosas very easy. He pulled out the one on Horatio Gallica-Rosa first, knowing he was involved intimately with the kidnapping of the Master of Ceremonies. There was a yellow dot next to his name on the file tab.

There were only two sheets of paper inside. One was a yellow slip with “Archived: HGR2475-L” written on it. The second listed his name, gender, family line, height, weight and physical description, even down to locations of scars and birthmarks. It read like a processing sheet at a mundane hospital or police station. Beneath the basic data, in a box labelled “Preliminary assessment” there were a few lines of cryptic notes.

Emotionally unstable without int & man.

GTs—good rfs, nat. athl

PSs—fencing, chess

T—Strategy

VS—8

Sf AS? = 0

Sf An? = High

Recommended for: BP AP1 & An. entry prog.

Focused on the information, Max stretched out a hand to rest it on the gargoyle's shoulder. "This is a report to the head of Chapter intelligence, to be filed under—"

"What are you doing?" The gargoyle twisted round to look at him, the open ledger resting on top of the filing cabinet.

Max shook his head. "Habit." He felt a flicker of irritation, then sadness before breaking contact. "It was trained into me so hard, I wasn't even thinking. We need to get this data back to Ekstrand for analysis."

"We need a Chapter, we can't do this by ourselves. Look at all this stuff. This would take our Chapter months and months to process."

Max nodded. "I bet there's a file on every puppet in Society here. It could revolutionise how we monitor them."

"I know, it's very cool." The gargoyle grinned. "I think these ledgers list everything the Agency has provided, and what they've been paid in return."

"What do the puppets pay with?"

"I don't understand most of it, a lot is in code, but they use the Queen's coin sometimes, which is interesting."

"Very," Max agreed. "And important."

"And worrying. It just goes to show how little we know about Fae-touched society. If all of this has been going on, what else are we missing?"

"Let's just gather the data and leave the wider implications to the Sorcerer," Max said, not wanting the gargoyle to get any more anxious. "I'll make some notes—you put the ledger back and take a look outside. Get a sense of how big this place is but just look, don't go out there, in case someone is looking out of a window. We need to get as much information as

we can back to the Sorcerer so we can better prepare for the next time we come here.”

Whilst the gargoyle obeyed, Max copied the notations listed in Horatio’s file and that of his parents. Flipping through the rest, he theorised the yellow dot next to the names indicated they’d been brought in by the Agency. At a glance, he saw that several Rosas were still unaccounted for and their files were still fat. He settled for making a note of their names for now. The sight of a couple of white dots in the Alba-Rosa section drew his attention and he pulled out the files on Amelia and Cornelius Alba-Rosa, the other roses who’d been in Aquae Sulis that night.

Their files were also practically empty, both containing a yellow slip detailing where their previous information had been archived. But there was a piece of white paper in each with a simple form detailing how Amelia and Cornelius were no longer formally of the Alba-Rosa family, to the extent they’d been given a new surname: White.

Max read the note underneath, the same in both files. “Exempt. Taken in by William-Reticulata Iris. Formerly AS, now L.”

“What!” the gargoyle exclaimed as if Max had read it out loud. “Why didn’t Cathy tell us her husband saved those Rosas?”

Max put the files back. “I told you the puppet can’t be trusted. She’s been hiding those Rosas from us all along.”

“There must be a good reason.” The gargoyle sounded a little desperate. “What do we do?”

“I’m going to see if I can find the information about Miss Rainer, then we need to take this all back to Ekstrand and plan the next move.”

“So you’re still going to keep the deal with Cathy?”

“No. But I want the information on this governess if I can get it. It could be useful in more ways than one.”

“Mrs Lucy Rhoeas-Papaver,” Morgan announced, and Cathy did all she could to make the smile fixed on her face look genuine. At least the new butler seemed nicer than the interim one.

“Catherine.” Lucy entered, dropped a reticule and a small package wrapped in brown paper and string on the nearest chair, and reached towards her with both hands.

Cathy stood reluctantly and accepted the kiss on her cheek. Lucy’s blonde hair was pinned up and she was wearing a green travelling dress with gold detailing that suited her fair skin. Lucy was so petite that Cathy felt Amazonian next to her.

“It’s so good to see you again,” Lucy said as Morgan brought in the tea.

“And you,” Cathy replied, but she wasn’t sure how she felt about it. Since her return from Exilium everything seemed dulled. Even now, sitting down as Lucy retrieved her package and arranged her skirts, Cathy felt like she was watching everything through a pane of glass.

“Tom sends his love,” said Lucy with a smile.

“How is he?”

“Oh, fine. He’s a little worried about you, I guess.”

Lucy sought eye contact so Cathy busied herself with the tea to avoid it. “How’s Aquae Sulis?”

“Things are settling down again. The Master of Ceremonies hosted a soirée last night and he seemed very well.” She accepted her cup with thanks and handed over the package in exchange. “I brought you a gift. I almost bought an ornament, for house warming, but Tom advised me against it.”

Cathy let Lucy’s gabble wash over her as she untied the string and pulled off the brown paper. When a corner of the hardback cover was revealed her heart quickened, but when the title was exposed Cathy’s

expectations collapsed. "*Mrs Beeton's Book of Household Management*," she said, barely able to keep the disappointment from her voice. "How… thoughtful."

Lucy grinned. "Look on the title page. I wrote a little something there."

Cathy struggled to contain a deep sigh as she opened the book. Lucy's handwriting was extravagant in its loops and curls. "Sometimes the most remarkable things can be found in unexpected places" read the dedication. Cathy wanted to drop it on the sofa and go back to bed but then her eyes flicked up to the title printed above Lucy's words. She untucked the front flap of the dust jacket and lifted it to reveal the true identity of the novel: *To Kill a Mockingbird*. It made her genuinely smile for what seemed like the first time in days.

"Have you read it?" Lucy asked.

"No." Cathy folded the dust jacket back into place. "I fell for your trick."

"I thought I should play it safe. I was at a dinner party a couple of weeks ago and these two women were talking about how the novel constitutes one of the greatest threats to the moral fabric of Aquae Sulis. Can you believe that?"

"Which novel?"

"Any of them. If they come to visit and poke around your bookshelves they won't disapprove. Honestly, Cathy—may I call you Cathy?" She didn't pause for an affirmative. "Between you and me, I think the ignorance of some ladies in Aquae Sulis constitutes the greatest threat to the city's moral fabric."

Cathy didn't know what to say to that even though she agreed. Was Lucy testing her?

“This house is so beautiful,” Lucy said, snapping the strand of silence growing taut between them. “How are you finding it here?”

Cathy shrugged. She couldn’t think of anything to say. All of the words that would have so easily tumbled out had sunk to the bottom of her since Exilium.

“That good, huh? How about William?”

“What about him?”

Lucy sighed and put her cup down. “Are you both OK? Are you settling into married life?”

Cathy picked up one of the small plates. “Would you like a sandwich?”

“I’m sorry,” Lucy said. “I thought…I overstepped the mark, didn’t I?”

“No, not at all.” Cathy didn’t know where to look or what to say.

“I thought we could talk like normal people do, you know, because of what you told me that night I first met you about Mundanus.”

“Of course we can.” Cathy regretted that confession. It seemed like it was years ago but was only a few weeks. At least Lucy hadn’t reacted badly.

“Are you sure you’re OK?”

Cathy checked the sleeve of her dress was covering the bandage. It was so tempting to make an excuse and send Lucy back home but she didn’t want to be rude. “I’m fine. It’s just hard.”

Lucy nodded. “I know. That’s why I wanted to see you. I know how weird it is. One moment you’re alone and the next you’re supposed to fit in with another person’s life. And knowing what I do about…before…I figured it would be even harder for you.”

Cathy just nodded, fearing that if she spoke she’d weep. She didn’t want to let Lucy in, she didn’t want to talk about how she felt and what was going on. She wanted to curl up in a ball and sleep until it all went away.

“Is there any way I can help?” Lucy asked.

“I don’t suppose you have a kick-ass Charm to make the Irises forget I ever existed?”

Lucy shook her head.

“Damn,” Cathy muttered. “I suppose I’ll have to make do with cake instead.”

“You don’t want to run away again, do you?” When Cathy said nothing Lucy came over and sat next to her. “My God, you do, don’t you?”

“If I could I would.”

“But what about William?”

“It wouldn’t break his heart. He could marry Amelia. Then she’d be Duchess. I’m sure she’d love it and he’d be much happier with her.”

“The Alba-Rosa?”

“*Former* Alba-Rosa.”

“But what would you do in Mundanus?”

“What I was doing before.” Apart from the Josh part, Cathy thought. “I’d go back to my studies and get on with the original plan.” Lucy’s expectant gaze was hard to resist. “I want to be a human rights lawyer.”

Lucy glanced at the book. “I think you’ll like that novel. I hear the Irises are pretty strict about—”

“I don’t want to talk about them.” Cathy didn’t want to talk about any of it. She didn’t want to be reminded of dreams that seemed so unobtainable now. Would Lord Iris know she was thinking about running away again?

“There’s something I don’t get.” Lucy’s voice penetrated the fog of worry. “You say you want to stand up for people who don’t have a voice, but what about the ones you already know?”

“Who?”

“The women in Nether society.”

Cathy twisted to face her sister-in-law fully. “Eh?”

“Jeez, you’re something, Cathy.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You think you’re the only woman who hates the way we have to live? I didn’t think you were so—”

“Now just wait a minute.” Cathy abandoned her tea cup. “All of the women I’ve met in Society seem happy as Larry with their dresses and powerful husbands. They like the way things are.”

Lucy’s eyebrows arched high. “Really? You’ve asked them?”

“Well, no.”

“So you’ve just assumed that because they’re behaving the way they should in public?”

Cathy looked away.

“Listen.” Lucy’s hand touched her arm gently. “I don’t want to make you feel bad. I just don’t understand why you feel the need to fight for people in Mundanus when there are plenty in Londinium and in Aquae Sulis who don’t have a voice either.”

“You’re seriously telling me that there are women in the Great Families who hate the way we’re treated?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t see you leaping up to champion them.” Cathy regretted the words as soon as they’d left her mouth. “Sorry. That was rude of me.”

If Lucy was offended she didn’t show it. “Honey, no one is going to listen to someone from the colonies who’s been here less than a year. But they do sometimes let their guard down with people they don’t care about impressing. Like me.”

“But I’ve never seen any hint of anyone being angry with it all like I am.”

“But I bet you’ve never looked for the signs and I bet you’ve never asked them. It’s not the done thing here. How many women do you really know?”

There were none and Cathy felt like a fool. She’d spent all of her life pushing against Society, completely convinced she was the only one who felt out of place, when it made perfect sense for there to be other women just as unhappy as her. How many times had she tried to just fit in and keep quiet to avoid attention? What if they were doing the same thing out of fear of being the only one who felt there should be more to life than what was allocated to them by their husbands and fathers?

“Albion sure is a strange place.” Lucy didn’t seem to like silence. “It’s like it’s stuck, it just can’t seem to evolve.”

“Are things very different in America?”

“Hell, yes!” Lucy laughed. “I think you’d like it there much more than here. Seems to me that Albion needs something to shake it up and knock the dust off all these ancient Patroons who don’t realise how much things have changed.” She looked at Cathy. “Or someone.”

Cathy shook her head. “There’s no way I could do anything. Who’s going to listen to me?”

Lucy looked like she was about to answer but then just smiled. “I didn’t come here to give you a hard time. How about a tour of the house? Tom will want to know all about it.”

Cathy nodded but it felt like Lucy had just dropped a bomb in the room and then wanted to talk about anything but the things it had broken. The dream of escape was now tainted with the creeping fear that achieving her goal wouldn’t be a glorious triumph of successful rebellion but instead a cowardly act. Was it right to leave others to quietly suffer the fate she couldn’t accept for herself?

Like you could do anything anyway, she thought. But there was no comfort in reminding herself of how worthless her father had always considered her to be.

16

The butler closed the front door after the last of the guests left with smiles and promises to meet for tea. Will smiled at Cathy who sighed with relief.

“That went well,” he said. “Are you tired?”

“More relieved than tired,” she replied and then whispered, “I have got to get out of this dress.”

Will watched her go upstairs as he loosened his cravat. The first soirée they’d hosted since their arrival had gone well. Bartholomew had talked to Cathy at length for a portion of the evening and Will made a mental note to ask her what they’d discussed. When Cathy was out of sight he put his hand in his pocket and brushed the small glass bottle with his fingertips. It had been in his pocket and on his mind all evening.

“Will that be all, sir?” Morgan asked.

“Could you bring two cups of hot milk to me in the drawing room?”

Morgan bowed and Will was left in the hallway. He looked up the stairs and decided to have a brandy in the drawing room first.

“What a bloody palaver that was,” said a maid in one of the receiving rooms. He could hear the chink of glasses being put onto trays, and the general bustle of post-party tidying.

“She did it though, didn’t she? Don’t look much, but she kept her head.”

Even though he’d been taught from an early age not to pay attention to the servants he found himself lingering at the doorway.

“She asked me if I was all right earlier,” the first was saying. “Fancy that.”

“I think that’s strange. She don’t know how to be the lady of the house, that’s her trouble.”

“I think it’s nice. I was dead on my feet from all the lifting and she noticed. She—”

Will stepped into the doorway. The two parlour maids froze for a moment, then bobbed curtsies.

“Begging your pardon sir, we won’t be long,” the first one said with a blushing smile. She was very young. He couldn’t remember either of their names; they’d only arrived the day before with over a dozen other servants.

“Palaver?” he asked, and their cheeks blazed.

“With the furniture, sir,” the second said.

“Was there a problem?”

They looked at each other. “It didn’t arrive, sir,” the first said eventually. “The Agency said it would be here this morning, but by the afternoon there was still no sign of it.”

“The furniture in here?”

“Yes, sir, and the red drawing room. You was out. Mr Morgan tried to get a message to the Agency but we didn’t get a reply.”

He’d been with Amelia overnight and with Cornelius most of the day, discussing the guests who’d spent the evening with them. He’d only had time to bathe and dress before the first ones arrived. “I had no impression of there being any problems when I returned this evening.”

“Well, Mrs Iris had solved it all by then, sir. We don’t know how she did it, but it was all delivered and in place before you got back.”

“Not even Mr Morgan knows how,” the second one said. “But he was very impressed, sir, we all were.”

“We was worried you’d get back to empty rooms and the guests would have to be turned away.” The first had clearly enjoyed the drama.

Cathy hadn’t mentioned anything. She’d greeted him as if she’d spent the afternoon resting, as he’d hoped she would, not rushing around saving them from social death. When he’d been kissing Amelia goodbye, greedily stealing a few minutes with her in private as the carriage was prepared, Cathy had been dealing with a crisis and sought no credit for it when he’d reappeared.

He left the maids to their work, needing the brandy more than ever. Over the first week of their marriage, Cathy had impressed one of the most powerful families in Londinium, become the object of inappropriate affection from another, endured a harrowing experience in Exilium that she still couldn’t bring herself to talk about, and had executed every wifely duty —save one—with unexpected success.

Her steadfast refusal to carry out that one duty was making him consider something terrible. He’d been patient but that was easy when he had Amelia, who was all too happy to slake his thirst. He’d done everything he could to ease Cathy into every other aspect of married life as gently as possible. They’d actually started to have proper conversations instead of just arguments; she was adapting to him and he, in turn, to her. When she was debating something passionately with Bartholomew or Margritte, or laughing at some comment he’d made, he’d been attracted to her. But every time he tried to kiss her in anything other than a brotherly way, she rejected him and then retired to her rooms. Whilst it was far from unusual to sleep separately, everyone else did that *after* consummating the marriage.

Will poured the brandy, giving himself a generous measure. When he saw the blood after she’d returned from Lord Iris, he knew there had to be more than interrogation behind it, and her refusal to talk about it only made the suspicion stronger. It was no surprise when he was summoned four days later.

“Your milk, sir,” Morgan said, entering through the open door with a tray. “Is there anything else you require?”

“No, thank you, Morgan. Oh, one thing, I understand the Agency let us down today.”

“Abominably sir, but Mrs Iris instructed me not to trouble you with it.”

“Did they explain themselves or send an apology?”

“No, sir,” he replied. “I’ve never known anything like it.”

“I see. Goodnight, Morgan.”

“Goodnight, sir.”

Will waited until the door was closed and took the bottle out of his pocket. “I’ve been patient,” he said to himself. “She’s being unreasonable.”

He took another swig of the brandy but its warmth didn’t comfort him. He inspected the plain green glass bottle, unlabelled in case it was found by a servant or—worse—his wife. It wouldn’t hurt her. He would be as gentle as he could, he even hoped she might enjoy it. He’d been told it was rare for the woman to fall pregnant the first time and he didn’t want to have to resort to this again.

He put the bottle on the tray and swilled the last of the brandy around the glass, irritated with his procrastination. His father wouldn’t have given it a second thought—then again, he wouldn’t have listened to her protests on the wedding night. But he wasn’t like his father.

“It’s wrong,” he muttered and picked up the bottle to put it in his pocket. But then he remembered Lord Iris asking why she was still virginal. How did he know? Had she admitted it under duress?

Will had never experienced the wrath of the Fae and didn’t want this to be the reason for the first time. He slammed the brandy glass down, uncorked the bottle and dumped its contents into the cup on the right. Then

he gulped down some of the milk from the other cup so that at a glance he would know that hers was the fuller of the two.

The milk soured in his belly as he carried the tray up the stairs. With every step, he tried to convince himself it was the best for both of them. Once she realised it wasn't going to be awful, perhaps relations would be better between them. He'd heard tales of girls reaching their wedding night and having no idea what was supposed to happen with their husband. Perhaps Cathy's ignorance was fuelling a fear of it. That didn't seem right though; she seemed more worldly than him sometimes.

Her lady's maid was leaving as he reached the top of the stairs. Upon seeing him she curtsied and left the door open when he gestured that he was on his way to Cathy. He knocked and went in. She was perched on the edge of the bed, sitting unnaturally stiffly. The pillow next to her was crooked and he wondered what she had stuffed under there so quickly.

She was dressed in a blue silk nightgown and robe that brought out the colour of her eyes. Her hair had been let down and the elaborate pinning for the soirée had left loose curls that rippled down her shoulders. There was a slight flush to her cheeks as she watched him set the tray down on the dressing table.

"I brought you some milk," he said.

"Oh. Thanks."

He left it on the tray, not wanting to appear too keen for her to drink it. She was tense and seemed more so when he closed the door. "I heard about the furniture."

"I told Morgan not to—"

"I overheard the parlour maids talking about it. How did you solve the problem?"

"You don't honestly want to know, do you? It's very boring."

“They didn’t make it sound that way.”

She shrugged. “They just don’t understand it, that’s all. I went into Mundanus, I made a few phone calls, it’s no big deal or anything. When you’re in London and very rich there are very few domestic problems that can’t be solved with money.”

How in the Worlds had she known who to call? It certainly wouldn’t have occurred to his mother to solve the problem in that way. But it wasn’t the time to ask. “I wanted to thank you. It sounds like you handled it all brilliantly.”

“Oh, for God’s sake, it’s not like I saved a man’s life. It was some sofas, tables and chairs. You make it sound like I was some superhero.”

He approached her slowly. “May I sit next to you?”

She nodded after a beat, wary. “Aren’t you tired?”

“No. I need to unwind after those kinds of events.” He sat—not too close—and she pulled her legs up and tucked her knees under her chin, making the silk pool over her toes. When he glanced at them she tucked the fabric underneath her feet. “What was Bartholomew talking to you about?”

“We were discussing the Enlightenment.”

“All that time?”

“It’s interesting. And we talked about the student strikes at the University of Paris when the church tried to stop them learning logic and rational thinking. You know, oppression, control of intellectual pursuits in patriarchal societies, that sort of thing.”

“The Tulipas have been speaking very highly of you in Londinium circles,” he said, letting his pride show.

“I like them,” she said. “I never thought I would ever say that about anyone in Society, but they’re interesting, and they don’t mind if I show that I actually know something more than which colour is fashionable.”

“It’s very different to Aquae Sulis, isn’t it?”

She agreed and scratched her wrist. “I’ll be glad when this bandage can come off.”

“May I see?”

She extended her hand and he gently slid the silk up her arm to reveal the neat white bandage. Unlike the first few days it wasn’t stained with blood. He carefully undid it and inspected the wounds. “This is healing nicely,” he said. “Do you have a clean dressing?”

“I’ll get one.” She slipped off the bed and went into the adjoining dressing room.

He lifted her pillow and found a paperback novel with some sort of bizarre contraption on the cover. It appeared to be in outer space, heading towards a planet. He replaced the pillow and when she came back he re-dressed her wrist. “This will be off by the end of the week. Lucky we haven’t had a ball to go to yet.” He tied off the bandage and caught hold of her hand. “Are you all right, Cathy?”

She just looked at him for a few moments. “Why do you ask?”

“You haven’t been the same since you went into Exilium.”

“For the worse or the better?”

“You seem less angry.”

She didn’t reply, easing her hand from his grasp. “I suppose I’ve been trying to be a good wife.” She spoke with such sadness it was as if she were talking about a bereavement.

“And you have been.”

“I’m not looking for reassurance. I know what I have to do.” She looked towards the window, eyes shining. “Running a house isn’t so hard.”

He looked for some sign of stubbornness or blatant defiance but there was none. “What did he say to you?” he asked, moving closer. “What

happened there to make you so different?”

“He…he made me realise there’s no point fighting you or the family.” She looked down at the bandage, distant. “He’s not like Lord Poppy.”

“Cathy.” Will slid closer to her, took her hands and kissed the back of them. “Our marriage doesn’t have to be like a death sentence. I think we could be happy in Londinium. You said yourself you like the Tulipas. That’s a start, isn’t it?”

“I suppose so.”

“And I know there’s a book under the pillow,” he said and she started, then looked fearful. “Why are you hiding it?”

“I’m not supposed to read books like that.”

“Books like what?”

“Science-fiction,” she whispered, ashamed.

“Of course you can. You can read whatever you like, you’re the lady of the house. I’m not going to stop you. How absurd.”

She gawped at him. “Really? You’re not going to freak out and burn them if I have some in the house?”

“Burn books? What kind of savage do you take me for?” Then he realised why she said it and winced. “Did your father do that by any chance?”

She nodded. “All of them. He made me watch.”

He stroked her fingers with his thumbs, moved a bit closer. No wonder she was so guarded all the time with a father that destroyed what she loved, and beat her brutally…“Is that why you didn’t want to marry me? Did you think it would be beatings and censorship?”

“It was a big part of it. I thought all men in Society were like that, I thought you would be, and if not now, eventually. I thought the more you got to know me, the more likely you’d be to do the same.” She saw his

horror. “Oh, I realised pretty quickly you’re not like that, really! You’ve been kind actually. Not what I expected at all.”

He wanted to kiss her and initiate something physical to build on this new intimacy. But there had been times in the past week when she’d started to talk openly with him and then closed up in seconds at any hint of his demonstrating his affection. So he held back, mindful of the potion waiting in the cooling milk, hoping the right moment would reveal itself.

“I’m glad you could tell me about what happened with our patron. Please don’t feel you have to hide things from me. We shouldn’t have secrets between us.”

“My mother once said to my aunt that a marriage was only as strong as the secrets kept from the husband,” Cathy replied.

“You’re trying to change the subject,” Will said, but she kept silent. “Secrets are poisonous things. I trust you to keep mine as much as I hope you could trust me.” He knew it was a gamble, but perhaps if he placed his trust in her first, she would let her guard down a little more. “I’m going to tell you something that is a secret in my family, one that could cause harm if it were to reach certain ears, to prove my trust in you. In the Iris family, there’s a tradition of having three children each generation.”

“Three?” She bit her lip.

“Lord Iris is fond of the number. I say it’s a tradition, but it’s more than that; it’s one of those unwritten rules. My mother had a fourth child whilst I was on my Grand Tour, and no one outside of my immediate family knows.”

“Not even the Patroon?”

“Especially not the Patroon. The poor girl doesn’t even have a proper nanny. She’s called Sophia and she’s a sweet little thing.”

“You miss her,” Cathy said softly.

“Yes,” he said. “Very much. My siblings refused to play with her so she got rather attached to me.”

“What would happen if the Patroon found out?”

“Nothing good.”

“I promise I won’t tell a soul about Sophia.”

He thought of the strange way she spoke sometimes, the accusation that Horatio made against her. “Is there anything you want to share with me?”

“Well…I was thinking about asking Margritte if she’d like to go to some of the museums and galleries in London with me. She loves art, we talk about it a lot, and—”

“That would be fine,” he said. “Just be careful how much time you spend out of the Nether. It adds up. Look at Freddy.”

“I’d rather not,” she said. “An afternoon is hardly going to turn me grey, is it?”

“No, but afternoons here and there over a few hundred years add up.”

“I’ll bear that in mind,” she said. “And I was thinking about seeing if there are people in Londinium who might like to meet and talk about literature. And maybe other subjects too.”

“A book group?”

“Yes, do you know of any?”

“No, but I met someone on my Grand Tour who invited me to one. It was a very strange evening. I can’t see any harm in you making friends here. In fact, that can only be a good thing. It would never take off in Aquae Sulis, but they do seem to favour intellectual pursuits in Londinium. Perhaps you’ll start a trend.”

She raised an eyebrow. “You’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

“The Duchess of Londinium is one of the most influential people in Society, a natural trendsetter. It would be good for you to get a taste for it

early.”

She frowned at that. “You’re still set on the throne then.”

“Of course, nothing has changed. In fact, I think my chances are better than I thought they’d be.”

“But don’t you think Bartholomew would be a good Duke?”

Her comment triggered a flash of jealousy, even though he knew she didn’t mean offence or anything more than truthfulness. “I think he would be an excellent Duke,” he finally said. “But that’s neither here nor there. Our patron demands I take the city. And you know how insistent he can be.”

She nodded, the brief brightness he’d rekindled ebbing away at the memory of the Fae. “Will…I appreciate you giving me time to…get used to you. And I know there’s pressure to consummate, as much upon you as there is me. I wanted to say thank you, for not pushing it. I know you must be worried.”

“If we’re to be truthful with each other then I have to say I am worried and, yes, I’m under pressure.” He searched her face for the impending barbed remark but there was no sign of it. “Is there something about it that you’re frightened of?”

She shook her head. “Not of the act, no.”

“Are you so repelled by me?”

“No,” she said, “you’re very handsome. And kind and, well, it’s just me.”

He could see she didn’t want to go into it any further. He could give her the drink now, talk to her for a while as it took effect…his duty could be done within hours and the pressure would be gone. But holding her hands—for the first time she hadn’t complained about it—and seeing her genuinely trying to find a way to live her new life, he simply couldn’t bear the thought of using magic to overpower her free will.

“I should let you get some sleep.” He kissed her hands again, whilst he could.

“Oh, I forgot about the milk.”

“It’ll be cold now. I can have Morgan bring a fresh cup if you wish.”

“No, thanks.” She settled, giving his fingers an affectionate squeeze. “I don’t really like warm milk, to be honest. I like cocoa more.”

“Goodnight then.” He kissed her on the forehead, deciding to give her another day or so. The inner struggle quietened now he’d decided not to go through with it, but he still noted her preference, should it be needed in the future.

17

Amelia sat at her dressing table, holding the atomiser up to the sprite globe. Less than a quarter of the perfume was left. She put it back, fingering the tassel as she remembered making the rosewater with her mother. They'd talked about Horatio and what it would be like to be Duchess. Amelia had said she hoped her sons wouldn't inherit his large nose. Her mother commented that, large-nosed children or not, marrying him was the surest way to the Londinium throne and, besides, the contracts had already been prepared.

Now that contract would never be signed, and she would never be Horatio's wife. Some days she feared she was going mad, the number of times she replayed those last moments as Rosas, the sight of him frozen by a Doll Charm and carried out on the Collectors' shoulders. When she remembered the Charms failing she'd thought that was the end of it. Not only had their plan failed catastrophically but they were going to be carried off to the Agency too. Every time she pulled herself out of the memory she was shaking. Each time she heard a thud downstairs or the front door close, she imagined Collectors running up the stairs. She'd taken to sleeping with a chair jammed under the door handle for the first few days but now William turned up at all hours she couldn't do that anymore.

Amelia tried not to think about Horatio but it was impossible. Unlike many destined to be married, they knew each other well. Or as well as any man knew her, which admittedly was hardly at all. But they had shared games of cards and enjoyed secret meetings in the lead-up to the Aquae

Sulis Season during which they ate Turkish delight and plotted how to destroy the Iris-Papaver alliance. The hardest thing about the weeks before that awful night was having to play nothing but the girlish coquette. She'd been homesick for Londinium and her own secret life. To be back at home and yet cut off from the things that truly enriched her life was a gentle torture. It was impossible to feel settled and safe, despite William's promises, and the boredom was almost unbearable.

She'd known from a very young age that she would be married to the future Duke. As the families were agreed and relations good between the lines, it took the pressure off; the best match had already been made for her. It didn't alter the fact that she liked to ensure as many men and women as possible in the Londinium Court were in love with her. That was just good planning. She knew when she became Duchess she would need every ally she could get in order to maintain their power. To think that the plain, awkward idiot Papaver was the one William planned to sit by his side drove Amelia insane with anger. The stupidity of it! The waste!

She pulled the bell cord. She wasn't thirsty but tea would break up the interminable afternoon. She'd embroidered until her vision had blurred, had arranged her outfits into a dozen combinations that she would likely never wear and wept for her mother. That had drawn her to the table and the atomiser. At least they'd chosen a Charm derived from another source, purchased at the Emporium, rather than using one of the staples in her mother's repertoire. They'd been worried the Irises would suspect her and be vigilant for Rose-based Charms. That one bit of planning meant she still had a means to control William. But what would she do when the perfume ran out?

The maid brought in the tea, set it down, asked if she required anything else and was sent away. They were used to her taking afternoon tea in her

bedroom now; she spent most of her time there. She couldn't bear the sight of the drawing room anymore; it reminded her of her mother too much. The empty places in the dining room made her think of the dinner parties they no longer had.

Amelia poured the tea, wondering whether William would still love her when free of the Charm's influence. It wasn't the first time she'd used it but the majority of the victims were mere mundanes. Once she'd taken everything she needed she tossed them out of her life without bothering to see if their infatuation continued without exposure. She regretted that now and wondered whether the mundane manager of her secret company was still infatuated with her. She couldn't risk going to see him; even though the Agency wouldn't expect her, as a lady, to hold business assets, they might still be watching her for signs of their father's hiding place. After taking so many years to establish her business and working so hard to keep it safe from discovery by anyone in Society, she couldn't allow it to fall into the Agency's hands. And there was the artist she'd recently snatched from Neugent's grip. Would he be as susceptible to suggestion now? Would Neugent be able to tempt him back?

Footsteps on the stairs made her jump but it sounded like Cornelius so she relaxed. His coded knock confirmed it and she called him in.

He looked serious, as he always did these days, but also purposeful. "Darling, I need to talk to you. Is this a good time?"

"The tea is still hot," she said with a smile, setting aside her own preference to be alone in favour of ensuring he was at peace. She knew he was working hard in his own way to keep them safe, just as she was in hers.

She poured as he settled himself. "I can't believe I'm getting used to taking tea in your bedroom, Amelia."

“These are strange times we live in,” she said, passing him the cup and saucer. “Now, what is it?”

He drank first and set the saucer on his knee. They were almost savages these days. “I’ve just had a note from William. The Marquis of Westminster has declared the Court will convene in two weeks’ time.”

“And what of the new Duke?”

“Whoever believes himself to have a claim is to declare as much on the night.”

“So it’s as we thought—a complete mess.”

He raised an eyebrow. “It’s not the most elegant way to acquire a Duke, but at least it will be over quickly. Only the most confident will put themselves forward and the chap with the most support takes the throne.”

“Only those confident of support or irretrievably arrogant will step forwards,” she corrected.

“That may be so, sister, but it still results in a new Duke.”

“Will must be disappointed. Two weeks isn’t enough time.”

“He’s been doing surprisingly well. He’s going to be sponsored into Black’s for one thing.”

“Darling.” Amelia shook her head at him. “I know you all like Black’s very much, but it’s not exactly a guarantee of power.”

“But it’s a sign he’s doing the right thing. You know how hard it is to get in there.”

“I know it’s much easier to be thrown out and forgotten.”

“What is it? You’re not usually so negative. Has something upset you?”

Her fingers twisted the pearls at her throat. “It just seems so hopeless. Will cannot possibly take the city in such a short period of time. The Tulipas will be on the throne by the end of the month and we’ll be charitable cases for the rest of our lives.”

“You’ve been spending too much time on your own, darling.” He moved his chair closer to hers. “You hardly leave this room…it’s not good for you.”

“Where else can I go?”

He looked down. “I’m sorry. I’m occupied with helping Will, I don’t miss our old life so much. You always thrived on the latest developments in the Ton. But that’s why I’m here. I’ve been thinking about Will’s promise to elevate us, should he become Duke, and it’s clear we have to act.”

“What’s the point? He’s feeding you false hope. You’ll never be Marquis of Westminster, darling.”

“That’s enough of that,” he said, putting the cup down so hard it tipped in its saucer. He pulled her to her feet and marched her over to the mirror. “Look,” he said.

She took in her face, her dress. Same as always.

“At what?”

“You are not destined to sit in this room and wait for William to call. You are the next Duchess of Londinium, you always were and you still will be.” When she opened her mouth to protest, he pressed his forefinger against it gently, wrapping his other arm about her and holding her tight. “Listen,” he whispered. “If we play fair and act honourably, we’ll rot in this house whilst William and his wife enjoy a mediocre success in the Court. If we act decisively and with courage, we’ll not only put William on the throne, but you beside him.”

Her eyes widened. He didn’t remove his finger.

“I received a message from an old friend today, with some very interesting news. One of the Thorn brothers has escaped his prison in Exilium and I have a means to contact him. I’m certain I could use him to destroy the Tulipas and put William on the throne, widowed.”

She pushed his hand away from her mouth. “What are you talking about? Thorn will never want him on the throne.”

“It will only be temporary. Once you’re established as Duchess we’ll be sure to tell Poppy his favourite was murdered thanks to Will’s neglect and __”

She clamped her hands over her ears. “Don’t tell me anymore, you fool! I don’t want to give anything away.”

“You won’t oppose me?”

“Of course not.” She turned and embraced him. “Do what you feel you must, you have my total support. Just don’t get it wrong. We’ve had the only second chance we’re ever going to get.”

Cathy sat at the desk in her study looking at the sketch and comparing it to the picture in the book. She’d asked one of the footmen, a young man called Coll, to go and buy her paints, pencils, paper and all the other trappings of an artist, including books purporting to teach people how to draw.

They lied.

She tossed the pencil onto the desk. She had less than three weeks to come up with a masterpiece. Now she had an Iris secret but wasn’t sure if she could bring herself to use it, after seeing the way Will spoke of his secret sister. Nothing about the commissioned Charm had arrived from the Shopkeeper and she was starting to panic.

She unlocked the drawer in her desk, pulled out one of the packets from the Emporium and rang for tea. Once she was alone again, she unstoppered the phial and sniffed at it tentatively. It didn’t smell of anything but she could hear it fizzing like mundane lemonade. She dumped the contents into

her tea. She needed to make progress fast and it was one of the few days when she didn't have anything in the diary.

She waited, listening to the clumping footfalls of the delivery men from the Agency. They were carrying hundreds of items into the house and filling the remaining receiving rooms with all of the furniture and ornaments that people seemed to think were important.

The Agency insisted her instructions for the previous day's delivery had specified that the items be brought with today's batch. She knew what she'd instructed, and it wasn't what they said, but they were never going to admit the error. She wondered if Bennet was petty enough to alter the date to spite her, seeing as her brief calculations at their first meeting had deprived the Agency of a sizeable amount of money. She suspected Margritte had been checking her accounts and dealings with the Agency too. Cathy knew it would be weighing on Georgiana's mind, though she'd never admit it. If other billing queries had flooded in after his meeting with her, Bennet would know she'd broken a cardinal rule of Society: never talk about money.

Whether the Agency had deliberately tried to make her life difficult didn't matter; she couldn't summon the passion to care about it. It was nothing compared to the challenge imposed upon her by Lord Poppy.

Will had barely been present. The conversation they'd had the night before in her room was the lengthiest since her return from Exilium. As she'd drifted off to sleep, she imagined inviting Margritte on a museum trip and bringing in books from Mundanus bookshops without fear for the first time in her life. But the next day those desires seemed distant and felt like silly daydreams she'd once had.

Then she remembered the latest piece of magical paper sent to her via her uncle to open a Way to the Sorcerer. It was tucked in a book at the

bottom of the one lockable box in her bedroom. Surely they would have tracked Bennet to somewhere useful by now? The Arbiter would be wondering why she hadn't gone to them to collect the information on Rainer.

Cathy laid her hands on the table in front of her and looked at the wedding band. If Lord Iris could summon her, could he tell when she left the Nether? Did he know that she'd been in Mundanus yesterday, just for half an hour? There hadn't been any repercussions, but perhaps he'd known she was only there to solve a domestic problem, and therefore permitted it. She was staring at it so intently the band started to blur. I can't go to the Sorcerer, she thought. I can't take the risk.

The sprite light was reflecting from the band so beautifully that the fear of Lord Iris started to melt away. She moved her hand off the desk and onto the blotter, fascinated by the difference in colour, that point of transition from flesh to paper. She stared at the texture of her skin, the point where it met the wedding band. Perhaps she could draw that.

A knock at the door made her straighten. "Come in."

Morgan entered. "My apologies, but Dame Iris is here to see you."

She jumped to her feet. "What?"

Morgan repeated himself, adding, "I took the liberty of showing her to the red drawing room. It's one of the best presented and furthest away from the stairs the delivery men are using."

"Oh. Thank you. Is my husband at home?"

"No, ma'am, I understand he is with his tailor."

"Oh, God," she whispered. Morgan had already learned to ignore her more inappropriate responses. "Well, I suppose I'd better get this over with. Do I look tidy?"

Morgan’s left eyebrow twitched. “I couldn’t possibly find fault with your appearance, ma’am.”

She followed him out, checking that the long sleeve and lace edging were tugged down sufficiently to cover the bandage, then she remembered she should be gloved and ran back to the study to fetch them. She had to stop herself staring at the way the light played off the sheen of the silk.

She’d met the Dame very briefly after Will’s mother had broken the news of the curse to her. The Dame was the most powerful woman in the Iris family and, being married to the Patroon, the last woman in the Worlds that Cathy wanted to have as a guest.

Morgan opened the door for her and she found the Dame inspecting the ornaments on the mantelpiece. Her elegant midnight-blue dress was cut in the late Victorian style, though with fewer bows and frills than the mundane Victorians favoured at that time. Cathy wished the trim was in a slightly darker shade. A petite woman, the Dame’s waist was tiny and the bustle only accentuated it. Cathy would have guessed her to be in her mid-twenties if she hadn’t known the Dame of the Iris line was rumoured to be over a hundred and fifty years old. All Cathy knew about her was that she was Sir Iris’s second wife and nobody talked openly about what had happened to the first. She’d be happier to paint that secret, if she could discover it.

Dame Iris didn’t turn at the sound of her entering and Cathy didn’t know what to do as she lurked near the door. Whilst she was mistress of the house she was still mindful of the Dame’s status.

The Dame adjusted the alignment of an ornament with a gloved fingertip. Cathy wondered who’d presented her with gloves on her wedding day. Was she bound by the same curse, or was a woman trusted by the time she’d risen to be the matriarch of the entire family?

She finally turned towards Cathy. She was a very attractive woman, beneath the haughty contempt. She had a delicate nose with a slight upturn at the end, all the better for giving the impression she disapproved of everything she saw. Her eyes were a dark blue, her hair a pleasant brown and artfully arranged.

“Well, don’t just stand there, girl!” she said in a voice pitched at the perfect level to make Cathy jolt as if she’d been rapped on the knuckles with a ruler. “Invite me to sit and offer me tea, for goodness’ sake!”

“W-would you care to take a seat, Dame Iris?”

“Why, thank you,” she said and planted herself firmly in the middle of the most comfortable sofa, not once having to adjust her dress or bustle as Cathy always did when wearing that style.

“And would you like tea?”

“Please.” The Dame smiled, as if starting from the beginning again.

Morgan gave a nod of acknowledgement and closed the door, leaving Cathy to sit opposite the Dame.

“Now, I had hoped to visit several days ago, but events conspired to make that impossible. Firstly, I would like to welcome you personally into the family. I’m certain you are delighted to be brought into one of the most respected families in Albion and the Frankish Empire.”

“Thank you, Dame Iris.”

“It’s my responsibility as Dame to ensure you settle into the family well and execute your duties with perfection. The Iris way accepts nothing less, and I expect your total devotion to learning our family traditions and becoming an expert on our history.”

Cathy took a sudden interest in the rug beneath the table. She was captivated by the way the variations in the direction of the pile affected the colours.

“Over the next three months,” Dame Iris continued, “I will spend time with you to undo any poor habits you may have carried over from your previous life, and ensure you’re behaving correctly. For the six months after that I’ll see less of you but expect regular visits and twice-weekly letters detailing your movements and achievements. For the last three months of your first year, I will permit you to socialise independently and write to me fortnightly.”

There was a pause. Cathy looked up from the rug and saw an expectancy on the Dame’s face that made her squirm. “Oh,” she said, not sure of what she was supposed to be saying.

“Oh! Is that how you thank a matriarch of my stature for devoting valuable time and effort to you?”

“Sorry, I mean thank you.”

“Evidently you need a firm hand to lift you to our standards.” The Dame paused, examining Cathy’s face and dress. “Quite why you were chosen over your younger sister I have no idea, but one must make the best of what is given.”

Anger flickered in Cathy’s chest, the first time in days. “Lord Poppy and Lord Iris seemed to believe I was preferable,” she replied. “Do we not have to accept their better judgement?”

The Dame’s eyes widened until there was white all around the blue irises. She opened her mouth, presumably to chasten her, when Morgan knocked lightly and opened the door to bring in the tea.

Cathy smiled at him; her mouth was paper-dry and her stomach needed to be settled. The pouring of the tea was enough to weaken the Dame’s frustrated reprimand until it was simply an irritated sniff as Morgan left.

“I can see there is a lot of work to be done, so we will begin straightaway,” Dame Iris said after a few sips of tea. “Firstly, please explain

to me why you are dressed as you are."

Cathy looked down at her clothing to remind herself of what she'd been buttoned into that morning. It was a simple green day dress with a black trim, one of the more comfortable as it was in the Edwardian style, and didn't require a huge bustle. "I…" She tried to fathom what the Dame meant. "I like green?" she said. And she really did, more than she ever had before.

"Do you? Why respond with a question? Regardless of the colour, why are you dressed so inappropriately?"

"I'm sorry, I don't understand."

The Dame tutted and set the cup and saucer down. "Really, child, you are astoundingly ignorant. Is that or is that not the same dress you breakfasted in this morning?"

"It is."

"Then why in the Worlds did you think it was acceptable to come to me dressed so? What an insult!"

"I beg your pardon, Dame Iris, I had no idea you were planning to visit." Had I known, I wouldn't have wasted that potion, she thought.

The Dame sniffed. "That is irrelevant. After breakfast is over and the most pressing concerns regarding the staff have been addressed, you should be changed into your receiving gown."

"My what?"

The Dame's mouth drew into a tight pucker beneath her nose. "I find it difficult to believe that one of the most influential families of Aquae Sulis would live as savages. Back to basics it is then. A gown for breakfast, then a receiving gown, then in the afternoon, after 3pm, a tea gown should be worn and then the appropriate choice of gown for the evening event. And of

course, should you choose to visit another household or promenade in St James's Park, you will wear a suitable gown."

"But that would waste hours!"

"Waste?" The Dame's voice was getting shrill. "How on earth can it be considered a waste to ensure one is properly attired? Did your mother not change her gowns to suit her activities?"

Cathy tried to remember. "I've no idea," she admitted.

The Dame was reduced to silence. She retrieved her tea and they both restored themselves. "What your mother chooses to wear is of no matter now," the Dame said, calmer. "You will abide by my rules, and I will see to it personally that your wardrobe is filled appropriately. I assume your dressmaker will be seeing you this week?"

"Yes, Dame Iris. I'm seeing her quite regularly to ensure my evening gowns are the height of fashion."

"Well, that's something, I suppose. Have your butler note down the dressmaker's appointment time for me before I leave. I will be here to ensure you order everything you need. Certainly nothing more in the Edwardian style, it's so unbecoming. You need to wear something that draws the eye down, to your waist, not above your shoulders."

Cathy slammed her cup down in the saucer as another burst of anger surfaced. "So I've been told in the past, Dame Iris."

The Dame fixed her with a stare but said nothing until Cathy looked back at the rug. "Now, on to your daily activities. Show me your embroidery, please."

"I don't have any." Cathy dreaded the response. "I don't like sewing."

"This won't do at all," the Dame said. "I require more tea."

Cathy poured her another cup. "It's not like I have time for it anyway," she said. "What with redecorating the house and—"

“I’ve heard enough. Two mornings a week you will accompany me to tea at various houses in Londinium, and you will not speak unless asked a question. You will watch and listen and learn how to behave appropriately. One morning a week you will host a sewing circle, attended by young ladies of my choosing, and you will practise your craft.”

“My craft? But I—”

“Every Iris lady embroiders beautifully, and expresses her creativity, dedication and attention to detail in her work. There’s no better way to pass one’s time, aside from hosting dinner parties and soirées to further your husband’s opportunities in Society, but having met you I pray there have been none so far.”

Cathy’s mouth hung open for a moment. “Actually,” she managed to say, “we’ve already hosted one and it was a great success.”

“By whose standards?”

“My husband’s.” Cathy hoped that would silence her.

“My dear girl, your husband may be one of the new bright young things everyone is so hopeful about but I doubt he has enough experience to be an adequate judge.”

Cathy didn’t want to speak to this awful woman a moment longer. She had a sudden moment of clarity and saw herself perched on the edge of her seat, being insulted and verbally abused by this twisted relic of another time. The Dame was making her feel utterly worthless again when she thought the worst of that was over.

“You are forbidden to go into Mundanus, of course.”

“What!”

“How dare you raise your voice in my presence!” The Dame sharpened hers to its most imperious pitch. “Under no circumstances will I endorse frivolous trips into Mundanus. If you are too thick-headed to safeguard your

youth then I must preserve it for you. You're not a beauty, Catherine. Were you to lose your youth it would only make things more difficult for you."

"That's it." Cathy stood up. "I don't have to sit here and be spoken to like this in my own house! I'm doing perfectly fine already, thank you. The Tulipas like me and Will thinks I'm handling everything brilliantly."

"Sit down and be quiet." The Dame didn't raise her voice, but Cathy sat back down again as if someone had pushed her. "Lord Iris warned me to keep a close eye on you and now I see why."

Cathy felt like she was being pressed down and her jaw muscles strained as she tried to speak. Dame Iris had used a Charm, one so powerful she didn't even see or hear her use it. Fear crept in at the edge of her anger.

"Yes." The Dame stood. "That's better, show some respect. I speak with Lord Iris on a regular basis and I'm sure you don't want me to report your appalling behaviour to him. I have little regard for what the Tulipas think of you, all I care about is the way it has inflated your pride and given you a false sense of accomplishment. When one is successful, Catherine, one cares not for what others think, but only whether they do as one wishes. And, by the way, there's nothing less attractive than a woman who thinks she's intelligent and inflicts her opinion on others." She adjusted her gloves, looked Catherine up and down with contempt and went to the door. "The butler will see me out. I suggest you reflect upon our conversation at length and obtain embroidery silks and canvas post haste. I expect to see a marked improvement in your behaviour by tomorrow morning, otherwise I will have to resort to similarly uncouth measures. It does not do to be an inconvenience to the Dame of your family. Good day."

Cathy remained seated as the Dame went into the hallway, had a brief conversation with Morgan and left. As the bang of the front door echoed

through the house Cathy felt light again and was back up on her feet, jumping slightly now she was unimpeded.

Working her jaw again, she picked up the nearest thing to hand, the fine china cup in front of her, and threw it against the wall. “Bitch!”

Feeling better, she sat down again. She was going to pick up her tech to resume her studies and then see the Arbiter to get that file on Miss Rainer. Damn the risk.

There was a gentle clearing of a throat at the doorway. “I think I need more tea, Morgan,” she said. “And the most inappropriate cake you can find.”

Perhaps Lucy was right. Surely other women in the Iris family felt that the Dame’s expectations were absurd? The thought was uncomfortable; if that were true, the argument for staying to fight was strengthened. She remembered her father’s anger at having been denied the opportunity to be brave in the First World War and wondered if she’d have felt the same in his position.

She didn’t have to make the decision straight away; she still didn’t have the means to escape and stay hidden. In the meantime the file on Miss Rainer could be useful. What if she’d taught other students before her? Perhaps there would be some clue or previous assignments listed so she could identify others who’d be likely to feel the same way. Surely that’s what Miss Rainer would have wanted?

18

Will stretched out in the carriage and thought ahead to the meeting he was about to have with Bartholomew. There was no doubt Tulipa had invited him over to talk about the letter from the Marquis, the one that had made Will's stomach sink. Two weeks was far too little time to make stable alliances with the various groups in Londinium, but Lord Iris would only care about the result, not the odds stacked against him. He feared it would come down to frenetic bribery and the vagaries of luck.

He needed to learn more about the Court than names and properties. No one wanted to organise a grand event so close to the fall of the Rosas, fearful it would be seen as bad taste, but it was what he needed to do; true power structures and patterns of alliances could be gleaned from just one evening at a ball. Could he depend on Catherine to support him well, though? She was hopeless at the larger events in Aquae Sulis and the last thing he wanted was for her to jeopardise his chances when he'd been making such progress with her. He smirked at himself. Yes, well done, he thought. Now you're actually able to converse with your wife. What an achievement.

He'd never known anyone so changeable and so confusing. Cathy could evidently hold her own in a conversation at a dinner or an intimate soirée and had managed to win over the Tulipas, yet the very simplest of social situations seemed to fox her. She seemed incapable of seeing that she was making progress too. Every time he tried to point out a success she shot him down as if she refused to believe she could ever achieve anything on her

own merit. No doubt her father's violence was a factor in her lack of confidence but how had a family as respected and successful as the Aquae Sulis Rhoeas-Papavers created such a strange daughter?

A pressure was building behind his eyes. If only he'd been married to Amelia, it would be so much easier.

The carriage stopped and Will focused on the meeting again. This time he was escorted through Hampton Court Palace by a more direct route, having already been suitably impressed.

Bartholomew was waiting for him in a richly decorated drawing room, wearing a wine-coloured tailcoat, cream breeches and waistcoat. His cravat was perfectly tied and Will struggled to deal with a brief feeling of inferiority.

"William," Bartholomew said warmly, shaking his hand. "Thank you for coming. Sherry?"

"Please."

"I trust you're well?"

"Yes, thank you. Catherine has asked me to pass on her regards."

Bartholomew smiled as he handed him the glass. "I'm sure you know why I asked to see you."

Will nodded. "A certain letter, I presume. Anything else and we would have met at Black's."

"Indeed. I won't waste your time with small talk; I intend to stand for Duke, Will, and I'd like to have your support."

Will took a sip of the sherry. It was the one conversation he didn't want to have. "I believe you would make a fine Duke," he said, weighing up what to say next. Lying and saying he would support him, only to step forward as a candidate on the night, was too despicable to contemplate. Simply telling Bartholomew he was unable to support him without

explanation would imply he was planning to support another. Tempting as it was to leave the Tulipa to fret about who that might be, it hardly seemed the behaviour of a gentleman. Besides, with only two weeks to go, Will was going to have to make his intentions clear to those he wanted to win over, and it would be all over Londinium before the week was out. “However, I’m not free to offer my support, as much as I would like to.”

Bartholomew was surprised, just for a moment, but Will saw it flash across his eyes. “Have you decided another is more worthy?”

“Quite the contrary, I fear,” Will said with as charming a smile as he could muster. “I’m putting myself forward, you see.”

“You? But you’ve been resident for less than a month! I didn’t think you were so arrogant.”

“I’m not, sir, believe me. We’ve only known each other a very short period of time, but I’ve already come to have a great deal of respect for you. I’d like to speak frankly, if we can agree it goes no further than this room.”

“You have my word.”

Will didn’t believe him. He wanted to, but with so much at stake, he knew the Tulipa would use every piece of information at his disposal. But Will had to plan for the possibility—nay probability—that he was going to lose. Duke Tulipa would remember his honesty.

“Were I to have a choice in the matter I would support you wholeheartedly. However, my family have tasked me with standing for the Dukedom, and as a loyal son I must obey.”

“The Irises are interested in Londinium?” Bartholomew set his glass down on the mantelpiece. “It’s a compliment they put so much faith in you, Will.”

“Or perhaps their interest isn’t so serious,” Will replied. “If they really wanted Londinium, they have many more experienced sons to send.

Perhaps they just wanted me out of Aquae Sulis."

"Perhaps."

Will was pleased he'd managed to muddy the water with a little self-deprecation. "So you see my hands are tied. I hope you take my being truthful with you as an indication of the high esteem I hold you in. When I'm forced to step forward on the night, you'll know why and not see it as a personal rejection of your candidacy."

"Is there no way we could persuade your family to release you from your obligation? I'd very much like to have you in my Court, in a high position. Standing against me is futile, and it seems such a waste to have your first Court appearance be a failure. Why not support me and avoid the embarrassment?"

"You're certain you'll win?"

"I'm certain there are no other serious candidates. Please don't take offence. I'm established in the city and have the support of the most influential people here."

"And you have many more years of experience than I," Will added. "All this is true. But what can I do?"

"Indeed. It's a shame, but I appreciate your candour. I do urge you to discuss this with your family. I'd be amenable to coming to an agreement."

"I'll put it to them. No doubt that would be far more beneficial than my humiliation." Will smiled and shook hands with him, settling into the role of dutiful son with no hope. By the time Will left, Bartholomew was back to smiles and gentle humour, unaware that Will was more determined to win than before.

Will looked out on the mists of the Nether, planning the letters he'd write once home, considering his options now Bartholomew knew of his ambition. If Lord Iris himself hadn't been behind this push for Londinium,

he would have approached his father to discuss terms he could take to the Tulipa, knowing his chances of taking the ducal seat were next to nil. For the first time since they'd arrived, he permitted himself to consider failure and really look it in the face. What would Lord Iris do when Tulipa took the throne? Surely the family's Patroon would defend him, make it clear how impossible a task it was? Would the Fae listen?

He had two weeks but even if he had two years it wouldn't be enough time to win steadfast support from the Court. He was still learning their names, let alone their strengths and weaknesses. Cornelius was a great help, but acquiring dry information wasn't the same as forming true alliances.

It had always been an impossibility. Perhaps he'd been right, perhaps his family did want him out of the way. No, that was ludicrous; they'd never wilfully put a son forward for guaranteed humiliation. Perfection and success in all endeavours were expected, and if they couldn't be achieved, an attempt was not made. But then again the family hadn't proposed this, Lord Iris had, and the Fae weren't known for their realism.

There was only one option: Will had to play the game whether he wanted to or not and fair play would not bring a win. If he was going to sacrifice his principles to keep the favour of his patron and Patroon, how far was he willing to go?

He closed his eyes and rested his head, letting himself be rocked by the carriage. He heard a gentle pop and the scent of irises filled the air.

A faerie dressed in blue iris petals was hovering in front of him. It smiled and waved. "Hello."

"What a pleasant surprise," he said, holding out the palm of his right hand so it could alight. Practically weightless, it felt like two cold peas resting on his skin. "You look as beautiful as ever."

It giggled, hiding its mouth behind its hands like the Japanese schoolgirls he'd waved to on the Grand Tour. "And you are too handsome to live anywhere but Exilium."

"If I were to live amongst such beauty I would fade in your eyes and I would hate that to happen." Will smiled, all the while preparing himself for the message she was about to deliver.

"You're definitely the best of the crop. I'm sure if I asked my Lord—"

"But Lord Iris needs me to take Londinium, and who are we to go against his wishes?"

Its tiny pointed ears drooped slightly. "True. I have a message from him. He expects a son by the end of the first year of your marriage."

"A son? My wife and I would be delighted to be so blessed, but these things are notoriously difficult to predict."

"Without our help they are." It smiled and fluttered up to his nose to kiss it lightly, making the tip tingle. "There, a little help from me, just between us, you understand. You still have to do your bit." It giggled and smiled provocatively at him. "But when you do and your wife's belly swells, you can be happy in the knowledge it will be a boy and a fine one too."

"Thank you. I have no idea what I've done to be worthy of such kindness but I'm deeply touched by your generosity."

"So there shouldn't be any problem with satisfying my Lord now, should there?"

"No, thanks to you."

It fluttered higher, until it was level with his eyes. "Really? Is she being a good wife?"

"Catherine is surpassing my hopes and expectations in every way," he replied smoothly. "I'm sure our marriage will only get better and better."

It clapped. “Oh, how exquisite. I’m quite envious of her. She doesn’t deserve you.”

He opted for silence. Why was Lord Iris paying so much attention to their marriage and, more specifically, its consummation? Why had he insisted they marry in the first place? Whilst it was normal for every Iris generation to hope for sons, it was rare for the Fae to actively intervene. Charms to influence gender were incredibly expensive and used only after two daughters had been born, not before the first had even been conceived.

The faerie waved and disappeared, the air rushing in with a pop to fill the space it had occupied. Would Lord Iris summon Cathy again soon? It had taken her days to recover from whatever ordeal he’d put her through and if she returned to Exilium as a virgin they could both be in serious trouble.

He rapped on the roof of the carriage with the tip of his cane and it slowed to a stop. He opened the window and called up to the driver who leaned over to listen.

“Take me to the Emporium of Things in Between and Besides,” he ordered, and the driver touched the brim of his hat.

Will settled back in his place as the carriage turned on the Nether road, hating the decision he had been forced to make.

Max sat on the chair in the Sorcerer’s ballroom waiting for the puppet to arrive, the mask resting on his lap. He remembered the lesson his mentor had given him in how to use it.

“Our mentor was one hell of an Arbiter,” the gargoyle said. It’d been so quiet in the corner Max had forgotten it was there.

Max nodded, remembering the sight of his dead body at the Cloister. Just an image, no grief and no anger.

The dry rasp of the gargoyle's attempt to weep filled the space. "We need to stop fucking about at the edges of this," it said. "Let's just go into London and bash some heads together until we find out what's going on."

"You know it's not that simple," Max replied. "I know you're finding it frustrating, but the Sorcerers have their ways. We can't force Ekstrand to hurry Dante into a meeting. Anything like that could precipitate a war. You know how twitchy they are about their sovereignty."

"It just seems like a waste of time. And *we're* finding it frustrating. You just get to sit there calm as a dead parrot whilst I'm feeling all of this. *I'm* the one who has to deal with it."

"If you can't handle this go and wait in the scullery."

"Piss off," the gargoyle growled. "I am handling it."

"You're still upset about her lying to us, aren't you?"

"So what if I am?"

Max had decided it could work to his advantage if the puppet saw the gargoyle was no longer on her side. It would put her on the back foot and he would exploit it.

The burning outline appeared, forming the Way, and in moments the puppet stepped through. She was wearing the same mundane clothes and long satin gloves as before, but now he knew why.

She opened her mouth to greet them as the Way closed behind her, but before the words emerged the gargoyle had covered the length of the room in only four bounds. It launched itself at her with a ferocity Max hadn't anticipated. She was slammed against the wall and her arms were pinned by its stone claws. She looked utterly terrified.

"Why did you lie to us?" it snarled.

“What?” Her confusion seemed genuine, but Max knew puppets were masterful actors.

“Why didn’t you tell us your husband has two pet Rosas? You knew we needed to speak to a Rose, urgently, and you didn’t tell us?”

“I…” She was breathless. “You’re hurting me.”

“Do I look like I care?” The gargoyle’s stone teeth were an inch from her cheek. “You think we want to find the Rosas to have tea together? Have a nice little chat and a catch up? Every day we’re delayed by you pissing us about, people are at risk. *Innocents*, not the likes of you.”

“You think I could just ask my husband where they are? I don’t know where he keeps them, I’ve never wanted to know. She’s his mistress and I’m the wife—there’s no way to ask that kind of question without it being dodgy as hell.”

“Not our problem.” The gargoyle didn’t let go.

“Yeah, it’s always mine, isn’t it? If I found out where they are and you went and interrogated them do you think that would be the end of it? Who else is going to lead an Aquae Sulis Arbiter to his bit on the side? You know what Iris men do to wives that don’t toe the line?” The gargoyle stayed silent. “They replace them.”

The gargoyle drew its face back an inch. “You should have told us anyway.”

“And hope you’d be sensitive to my circumstances? You think I’m that stupid? Your…handler over there thinks I’m worth less than horseshit, and wouldn’t have given a second thought to blowing my life up into more of a disaster than it already is. Now, will you please let me go, you’re really hurting me.”

The gargoyle released her arms and returned to all fours, prowling in front of her as it considered what she’d said. She rubbed her arms where

she’d been pinned.

“I thought you were being straight with us,” the gargoyle said after a moment.

“I have been as far as I can be without getting myself killed or enslaved, OK? Can you please just try to see how hard this is for me to get away with? I’m already taking a huge risk just being here.”

“But it’s not an altruistic act,” Max said. “You’re only here because you need us.”

She looked in his direction and saw the mask on his lap. She paled further. “What’s that?”

“It’s a Truth Mask,” he replied.

“There’s a clue in the name,” the gargoyle added.

She looked like she was trying to press herself back through the wall. “There’s no need for anything scary, OK?”

“Isn’t there? As the gargoyle said, we thought you were being straight with us, when all this time you’ve been withholding information critical to our investigation. We’ve been polite. And patient. It’s got us nowhere. Now you need to tell us the truth and this is the only way we can be sure.”

“That’s not true, I gave you loads on the Agency,” she said, her voice higher pitched. “I bugged that man, didn’t that lead anywhere?”

“It did, but, as we said before, that’s only one part of the investigation. We need to make some serious progress and your games are getting in the way.”

“I’m not playing games.” She stared at the mask and its rivets gleaming in the lantern light.

“We need to speak to the Rosas still in Londinium. We can’t hunt them so you need to tell us how to find them quickly. Tell us where your husband has stashed away his pet Rosas.”

“I can’t.”

“Then tell us how you hid from your family.”

“I can’t do that either.”

“Right.” Max picked the Mask up and made a show of checking the straps, giving her a good look at the metal face with a shaped nose and nostril holes. There were no holes for the eyes and a metal grill that would fit over her mouth.

“I really can’t!” she yelled. “Look, someone took a huge risk helping me, I don’t want to put him in any danger.”

“Not my problem.” Max got up.

“I swore I’d never tell anyone how it was done,” she said, palms flat against the wall as she tried to keep as much distance between herself and the mask as possible. “I can’t break that promise.”

“How many promises have you already broken?” the gargoyle asked, ending its prowling to stand in front of her, poised like he was about to pounce on a mouse.

She slid sideways, fumbling along the wall, looking for the doorknob that was no longer there. “There’s no way to leave this room without my say-so,” Max said. “There’s nowhere to go, puppet.”

She reached the corner. “I haven’t done anything wrong. Don’t do this, please.” Her pleading eyes fell on the gargoyle. “I told you as much as I could, I led you to the Agency. That was the deal: Agency for Miss Rainer’s details. Not this.”

“We got the file on her,” the gargoyle said. “All you have to do is tell us how or where the Rosas are hiding and you can have it.”

“Hold her still.” Max was close enough to see the sweat sheen on her face.

The gargoyle grabbed a wrist and pulled her towards it roughly. As she moved away from the wall it stepped behind her, raised itself on its haunches again and wrapped its stone arms around her in a bear hug.

“You see the studs on the inside?” Max asked, the puppet’s eyes huge with terror. “Apparently they hurt but don’t leave any permanent marks.”

“Wait!”

He took a step closer.

“Wait!” she yelled. “If you put that thing on me, I’ll never help you again. You said yourself this is just the start. How far can you get without me on the inside? It’s obvious you can’t act in London, or Londinium for that matter—what’re you going to do when you need to bring these people in?”

Max stopped. “You need us more.”

“Do I?”

She seemed bolder, as if a switch inside her had flicked from terror to absolute calm. The gargoyle was frowning. It had looked less happy from the moment it had grabbed her.

“Who else can help you?” Max asked. “You need a Sorcerer.”

“There must be other Sorcerers,” she replied, now staring him in the eye. “I’ll find one. I’d rather get you the information without screwing over the one who helped me. I will, I swear it, on my blood if you need me to, or whatever way you people do it. All I need is twenty-four hours. Then I want the information on Rainer.”

“Why didn’t you offer this before?” the gargoyle asked, eyes narrow, its teeth brushing against her ear as it spoke.

“I didn’t think of it. I haven’t been planning this out like a game of chess, you know. And this isn’t the only shit-storm in my life right now, OK?”

“If I let you go now, without using this, we’re back to square one and there’s no guarantee you’ll see it through,” Max said. “The way I see it, we use the mask, we get what we need before dinner.”

“And be left without an insider,” she reminded him. “And I reckon if you put that thing on me, and it hurts me, Lord Iris would know and kick up a stink. Then my uncle would find out and that would make things awkward between him and the Sorcerer. Do you want that?”

“Shit,” the gargoyle said and let her go. “She’s right.”

She staggered and hit the wall again. “Look, if it’s any consolation, I’d much rather deal with you than anyone else.”

Max pulled the folded piece of paper from his pocket that Ekstrand had given him in case Cathy needed to come back. “If you don’t come through the Way this opens at midday tomorrow, everything’s off. No second chance. You’ll get the file on Rainer when we know your information is legitimate.”

“I’ll be here,” she said. “I promise.” She looked at the gargoyle, as if about to say something, then didn’t.

Max opened the Way and she left. The gargoyle sat next to him, staring at the place she passed through. “We need whisky,” it said.

“I don’t drink.”

“I know. I definitely have the worse half of this relationship. I feel like shit now.”

“Why? She wriggled her way out of it, just like any other puppet would.”

“No, not like any other. I believe her. I don’t think she was trying to pull one over us; she’s not like that.”

Max turned to face it fully. “Were you here just now? Didn’t you see what she did?”

“I saw her keep it together when being held by me and threatened by you. Not many could do that. And don’t get angry with me, there’s no denying she’s—”

“I’m not angry.”

“You are, and now I don’t know whether to admire her or be pissed off with myself. Thanks.”

Max shrugged. “We’d better report to Ekstrand and hope he sees it the same way.”

19

For the fifth time on the journey Cathy opened her reticule to be sure that her tiny digital camera was inside. She pulled it out, checked the battery level and that the flash was set to activate in dim lighting, and put it back in her bag again. She was alone in the carriage travelling on the Nether road to the Emporium of Things in Between and Besides, something her uncle had advised her never to do. She had no choice; she had to be alone at the shop.

Cathy chewed a thumbnail as she went over the plan again. If it didn't work she'd be back to square one and wouldn't get the file on Miss Rainer. She had no idea how many Sorcerers there were, let alone how to find another, and didn't want to have that problem on top of all the others. As time went on it would only get harder to avoid Will, especially once all the silliness over the Dukedom was over and no longer distracting him. The days had been rushing by in a blur of social engagements and hours had been wasted with Dame Iris. She'd tried to get the Dame to agree she'd be better suited to painting but it had achieved nothing.

The carriage soon stopped and she reined in her impulse to climb out straightaway. The footman opened the door and lowered the step. She accepted his help climbing out; the last thing she needed was a sprained ankle.

"I won't be long," she said to the driver.

"I'll wait here, ma'am," he replied, and the footman walked ahead of her to the shop's door.

Even though the basic building was the same as the anchor property, the Emporium's Nether frontage looked very different with its traditional signage in elegant script above the door and window display of bottles and packets. The footman knocked twice and then entered. Having worked there, Cathy knew that those two knocks activated a Charm that adjusted the clock above the door inside to indicate that Londinium clientele were about to enter, as opposed to those from Aquae Sulis, Oxenford or Jorvik.

Cathy walked in as a customer for the first time in years and was relieved to see that the shop was empty. The Shopkeeper looked up from his book and smiled before tucking in the bookmark.

"Mrs Reticulata-Iris," he said with the briefest glance at the footman before the door was shut behind Cathy and the two of them were alone. "Catherine," he said more softly and came out from behind the counter. "How are you?"

"Oh, you know," she replied, feeling very strange standing there in a late Victorian style dress replete with trimming and bustle, not dissimilar to the one Dame Iris had been wearing. "Things could be better."

His smile was sad, then it faded as he laced his fingers in front of his chest. "I've been told the Charm you ordered should be delivered next week."

That would leave less than a week to paint something to satisfy Lord Poppy. She hoped the Charm was worth such an agonising wait. "Great. Thanks. I was hoping to buy some of that…what was it you called it… atmospheric mist of beautifying?"

"Do you mean the Beautifying Mist of Atmospheric Improvement?"

"That's the one!"

The Shopkeeper frowned at her over his glasses. "Really? I recall you disliked the name and the scent, two rather critical elements of that

product.”

“Well, I wanted to give it another chance.”

“In fact you described it as smelling of cut grass and almonds, and it made you sniffle like a mundane street urchin in February.”

“OK, I’ll come clean,” she said. “I want it for a parlour game. I didn’t want to tell you in case it offended you.”

“Oh, well, that makes sense now.” He smiled and she breathed out in relief. “I’m afraid it’s in the stockroom, I won’t be a moment.”

It was exactly what she’d hoped for. She knew the Shopkeeper never threw anything away; there was a box tucked away on one of the highest shelves in the stockroom for failed products. He hated heights, so it would take him a few minutes to collect himself after the trip up the ladder and re-emerge.

Once she heard the door of the stockroom shut Cathy scurried behind the counter and through to the cubbyhole office which contained the ledger. There was barely any light to see by, and she couldn’t strike the globe to wake the sprite as it would indicate she’d been there. She fished out her camera, switched it on and felt for the ledger. Mercifully it was open and in its usual place. Cathy took a close-up picture of the two exposed pages, checked it and took another in a slightly different position. She flipped a page back and took a couple of photos of those pages too. She risked repeating the process a couple more times, taking care to count how many times she’d turned the page so she could leave it open at the correct place. It was worth the risk; the more data she had, the easier it would be to crack the code used by the Shopkeeper to track sales and purchases. All she had to do was work out who’d been buying the most expensive Shadow Charms since the night the Rosas fell and she’d know where to send the Arbiter.

The camera was in her reticule and she was back in the main part of the shop before the Shopkeeper returned.

“Here it is, I’ll wrap it for you,” he said and she smiled, hoping she didn’t look flustered. “I’ll charge it to your husband’s account.”

“I suppose that’s one of the few advantages of being married.” She wondered if she was convincing.

He tucked the tissue-papered atomiser in a small box, then wrapped that in brown paper and tied it with string. “I do hope you can find some happiness, Catherine,” he said as he handed it over.

“I’m not giving up yet,” she replied. “Take care.”

“You too, my dear, you too.”

Unable to wait until she got back to Lancaster House, Cathy looked at the pictures on the camera’s small display screen whilst still in the carriage, but the Shopkeeper’s scrawl was too small to read. It wasn’t until she’d got back to her bedroom and uploaded them to her iPad that she was able to start work, after she’d told Morgan that she wasn’t to be disturbed.

The Shopkeeper only wrote the customer name in code and listed an abbreviated product name alongside it. Just a glance at the latest page confirmed her suspicion; a lot of Shadow Charms had been sold recently. However, without any dates entered alongside the sales, there was no way to know whether she was looking at sales over the last week or the last month. Flipping back and forth through the pictures she’d taken it was clear the Great Families had a lot of things to hide.

She had to narrow down the entries; the Shadow Charms likely to have been procured to conceal rogue Rosas hiding from the Agency would have been bought in the last two weeks. Based on her memory of the accounts she could make a reasonable guess that no more than the last two pages would cover that time.

Cathy made a list of all of the coded names of those who'd bought Shadow Charms. There were four different people, but only one that had bought more than one Charm, so she focused on that name.

"'Nasal Climber 6-1-L'," she muttered.

The Shopkeeper had made all sorts of comments about his customers whilst she'd worked for him but she couldn't recall anything about one having nasal problems. She realised that cracking a code without a reference point was going to take far too long and then hit upon the idea of finding an entry that she could tie to a person. It could give an insight into the numbers and letter after the pseudonym, at least.

With no date reference and only the product names to go by it seemed an impossible task at first. Then she remembered the day Tom had found her and how they'd rushed to the Emporium to find something to save Josh from Horatio. The Shopkeeper had given her a Luck Charm and it had only been a couple of days after she'd reconciled the accounts at the end of her vacation.

Cathy flipped back to a picture of the earlier entries and scanned the list until she saw the entry "Luck Egg—short duration". It was only a few rows beneath the last product she remembered tallying up. Under "payment" the Shopkeeper had written, "One kiss of genuine gratitude and affection", and she knew it was the charm he'd given her to protect Josh.

Her name was entered as "Flanders cockerel 5-2-L (AS)" and when she scanned up the list she spotted "Flanders cockerel 5-1-AS" against a purchase of a Seeker Charm. She deduced that was Tom, as the Shopkeeper had warned her he'd bought another Seeker Charm just before Lord Poppy found her. That meant "Flanders cockerel" was the code for their family name and that the second number was an indicator of where in the sibling pecking order they came; Tom was 1 as the eldest and she was 2 thanks to

being the middle child. After a few moments of chewing the end of her thumbnail, Cathy hazarded a guess that the first number was the number of generations down from the Patroon, or at least something along those lines to identify which set of siblings the second number related to. AS was most probably Aquae Sulis and the L against her name was because they'd entered the shop from Londinium, even though officially she was an Aquae Sulis resident. She wondered how he kept track of cousins but his memory was incredible—perhaps he only needed the prompt.

If she applied the same logic to the one who'd recently bought the shadow charms, that person was the eldest child of their generation and a Londinium resident. "Well, that's bloody useless, I need to know the family."

Flanders cockerel…how could that signify Rhoeas-Papaver? The Flanders part was probably because of the First World War association with the red poppy, but why cockerel? Then she recalled a painting by Monet that hung in the drawing room of her childhood home, one of a woman and child walking through a corn field dotted with poppies, and it was called *Les Coquelicots*. Could cockerel simply be a play on the French word for the red poppy?

"'Nasal Climber…'" Cathy whispered the epithet. People often referred to the Wisterias as climbers; it was a rather pathetic pun, the plant named after their line being a climbing vine and the family constantly trying to climb higher in social circles. Did any of them have a particularly large nose? Could the Shopkeeper be that childish with his nicknames?

She tried to remember the names of the Wisteria families resident in Londinium and recalled one that had been on Dame Iris's list of people she should know about: the Sinensis-Wisteria family. "Sinensis" was fairly

close to “sinuses” and the eldest son did have notably large nostrils. She shook her head. Surely it wasn’t so simple?

If it didn’t turn out to be the right family there would be no real harm done. With nothing better to offer him, it was time to contact the Arbiter and hope the Wisteria was buying the Shadow Charms to keep an illegal Rosa hidden. She needed to keep the Arbiter and Sorcerer on side. Even if they couldn’t get her out of the Nether by the time the painting was due, perhaps they’d get her out before Poppy realised how bad it was.

Max handed the piece of paper to Ekstrand and the Sorcerer scanned the information he’d copied from the Gallica-Rosa’s file. He would have given him the information sooner but the Sorcerer had been having one of his bad days.

“I have absolutely no idea what this means,” Ekstrand said. “There were lots of files?”

“Enough to store information on every single puppet in Albion, past and present,” Max replied. “Including detailed records on what the Agency provides for them. We’ve always assumed they’ve found their own ways to live in the Nether but I think we were wrong. This Agency arranges everything for them in return for payment.”

“Payment in charms or money?”

“Both, as far as we could tell, but there’s something more to it than that. I think the coded information is an evaluation of some kind, I just don’t know what Horatio Gallica-Rosa was being evaluated for.”

“Most worrying. This is far more complex than I’d anticipated and we’re under-resourced.”

“I pulled the file on that Miss Rainer,” Max said. “Seems she used to be the puppet’s governess. She was removed from the Rhoeas-Papaver household following a complaint from the puppet’s mother. Apparently Miss Rainer smuggled seditious materials into the household and exposed her student to ‘dangerous and inappropriate’ ideas.”

“So that’s why she’s different from the other puppets?”

“It seems so, sir. She requested asylum the first time I met her.”

“She’s still one of them though,” Ekstrand said, “whether she likes it or not. If she doesn’t produce the information we need, use whatever means necessary to determine where the hidden Rosas are. I want them found before the Moot.”

“Yes, sir,” Max said and left his study.

Axon was waiting in the corridor with the gargoyle. “Samuel Westonville is waiting for you in the sitting room,” he said.

“Thanks.” Max found Sam in front of the fire, slumped forwards, face in his hands. “Sam?”

His eyes were bloodshot and circled by shadowed skin. He had new stubble and the dishevelled state of his clothes suggested he’d been wearing them for a few days. “Axon picked me up earlier, he said you wanted to see me.”

“I’ve been looking into the forge where you made your wedding rings. I think you need to know what I found out.”

“It’s bad, isn’t it?”

Max didn’t say anything until he was sitting down with the gargoyle next to him. “You weren’t the only couple Neugent recommended the forge to. There were ten others before you, and all of them made their own wedding rings like you did.”

“What a romantic guy,” Sam said. “So you gonna tell me they’re all dead now or something?”

“How did you know!” The gargoyle’s mouth dropped open, making his face look like a grotesque designed to have water pour from it.

“What?” Sam broke out of his misery and jolted to the edge of his seat. “That’s not what you found out, was it?”

“Not exactly,” Max said.

“It was only one person out of each couple that died,” the gargoyle said.

“What the fuck?”

Max decided that next time he had to deliver news likely to upset someone he’d make sure the gargoyle was locked in a cupboard on the other side of the house. “Not straightaway, but at a young age.”

“How did they die?”

“Different things; a couple of cancers, a few heart attacks, a few I just couldn’t find out because they weren’t reported in the press. The forge isn’t the only thing linking them, Sam. The ones that died all worked for Neugent over the past ten years.”

“In Pin PR?” Sam was on his feet.

“One of them, yes, five years ago, but not the others. He’s worked for several companies over that time. Sam, please, sit down until I’ve given you all the information.”

“But my wife—”

“Please.”

The last thing Max needed was to have him run off into Mundanus and do something stupid. Sam sat down. “I looked into Neugent more closely. He’s never been married and he’s in his thirties, whereas you described him as being in his fifties, so something doesn’t add up there. Every company he’s worked for is owned by one massive international corporation, one I

didn’t know existed until I started looking into all of this. It’s called CoFerrum Inc.”

“I’ve never heard of it.”

“From the name I suspect it has something to do with Lord Iron,” Max said. “And I suspect he’s using Neugent to interfere with your wife in some way, resulting in her change in behaviour and physical weight loss.”

Sam was on his feet again. “I’m such an idiot. She wants to divorce me and it’s all because of Neugent. He’s been sniffing round my wife for bloody ages, he puts her in an apartment that’s got an iron cage built into it and now you’re telling me people who wear wedding rings made at that forge and work for him die young? That’s it.”

He marched to the door.

“Where are you going?” Max asked, struggling to get back on his feet.

“He’s gonna break Neugent’s face,” the gargoyle said, cheering. “Yeah, go on Sam, you show him who’s the man!”

“Be quiet,” Max said, but by the time he’d turned back to Sam, he was gone. Max limped out into the hallway to see Axon closing the front door. “He left?”

“Yes, sir, Mr Ekstrand gave no instructions for him to be kept here. A message has just arrived for you from Mrs Reticulata-Iris. She’s waiting in the ballroom. I understand you agreed to give her some information in return?”

Max took the small piece of paper. There was an address in London, then a sentence explaining it was the anchor property of a Mr Sinensis-Wisteria who “has been taking great efforts to hide something since the Rosas fell”.

“So Cathy came through for us,” the gargoyle said, peering over his shoulder to look at the note.

“She’s given us a name and address. She may have the wrong person.”

“But you’re gonna give her that file she wanted, aren’t you?”

Max nodded. “We’ve made a copy and if the puppet is still messing us about she’ll think we’ve fallen for it. It’ll make it more of a shock if we bring her in for interrogation.”

Cathy stepped through the Way and back into Lancaster House with the file on Miss Rainer clutched to her chest. She was grateful that no one was there to see her hurry into the bedroom.

Perched on the bed, nauseous with anticipation, Cathy opened the plain manila file from the Agency. The first line on the top summary sheet made her snatch up the piece of paper to read it again with disbelieving eyes.

“Name: Miss Natasha Rainer Rainsworth”

“She’s still alive!” Cathy laughed and then wept with relief. Miss Rainsworth was now a scullery maid at a house near Kew Gardens, anchor property for the Parviflorus-Ranunculus family, and had been since she’d been sacked from her position in the Papaver household. The rest of the page was a cryptic list of abbreviations so she flipped over to read the next.

There was a report on the complaint made by Mrs Rhoeas-Papaver that accused Miss Rainer of smuggling inappropriate literature into the household and giving lessons on “inappropriate topics” including social history with an “unusual focus on the Suffragettes and other such mundane matters”. She scanned down to the signature at the bottom of the page: Harold Bennet.

“That bastard! He knew all along!”

A section was highlighted noting that Miss Rainsworth was under no circumstances permitted to work in any household in which Catherine

Rhoeas-Papaver was resident. Paper-clipped to the report was a brief note in Bennet's handwriting outlining how he'd told the now Mrs Catherine Reticulata-Iris that Miss Rainer had died in order to avoid any further enquiries.

"Well, sod you, Bennet," she said to the signature and flipped forwards to a list of previous assignments. Rainer's first position was as a lady's maid, then she became a governess. Was that switch in career normal for Agency staff or had Rainer charmed her first employer into giving her a more challenging role suited to her intellect?

There was a knock on the door. "Not now, Morgan, I said I wasn't to be disturbed."

"It's me, Cathy," Will said and the handle started to turn.

She slapped the file shut, rolled over to the far side of the bed and shoved it underneath. She was just about back on top when the door opened.

"I told Morgan—" Cathy stopped when she saw the tray with champagne, two glasses and a bowl of strawberries.

"You're not unwell, are you?" he asked, pausing to close the door with his foot before setting the tray down on the dressing table.

"No." She shuffled to the edge of the bed. "I was just…having a lie down."

"Good." He smiled as he eased the cork out of the champagne and then poured it into the glasses.

Whilst he had his back to her she checked there weren't any pieces of paper in sight. She'd locked the camera and iPad away before going to the Arbiter.

"We have something to celebrate." He handed her a glass. "I've been accepted into Black's."

“Black’s?”

His smile lost its lustre. “The gentleman’s club. It’s the most exclusive in Albion and I thought it would take years to get in. It only took a week.”

“Oh.” It was hard to fake enthusiasm when she just wanted him to leave so she could carry on reading the file. “Actually Will, I—”

He chinked his glass against hers. “Here’s to the future.”

She couldn’t ignore the toast without being horribly rude so she smiled and had a sip. “Will, would you mind—”

“And here’s to you.”

The crystal rang as he tapped his glass against hers and sat next to her on the bed. They both took another sip.

“Why are we toasting me?”

“Because you won over the Tulipas. Bartholomew sponsored me into Black’s and I’m sure he wouldn’t have if he hadn’t been so delightfully charmed by you.”

“I’m not charming.”

“Nonsense. You’re just an acquired taste. How did it go earlier?” Her heart fluttered. “With Dame Iris. I heard she paid a visit.”

“Oh that,” Cathy said with relief. Of course he didn’t know what she’d been up to since then. “It was bloody awful.” A giggle slipped from her lips. “I probably shouldn’t have told you that. I survived. Let’s leave it at that.” She didn’t want to go into detail and prolong the conversation.

He beamed at her. “Here’s to successfully surviving the formidable Dame Iris!”

Another bright ring from the crystal and another sip of champagne and Cathy laughed, feeling a rush of euphoria rising in her chest like the tiny bubbles in her glass. Miss Rainer was alive! She was working at a house a

short drive away in Mundanus and there was nothing to stop her from going to find her.

Will reflected her smile. “Here’s to us,” he said and after tapping her glass he downed the rest of the champagne. “Now, celebratory strawberries, brought to us out of season by the magic of the mundane world!”

Cathy knocked back the last of her champagne, happy to celebrate even though it was for a different reason. She imagined running up to Miss Rainer and telling her that she’d got to university despite everything they’d tried to do to stop her, that all those lessons about freedom and the right to pursue one’s own life hadn’t been in vain.

Will relieved her of the empty glass and retrieved the bowl to set it between them on the bed.

She plucked out a strawberry and its sweetness exploded across her tongue. “These are so good!” Her heart raced with elation and they both laughed when they reached into the bowl at the same time. Will caught hold of her fingers and brought them to his lips. He leaned towards her, closing his eyes, and she found herself doing the same. His lips touched hers. Their warmth felt incredible and for the first time she thought only of Will. It was as if she hadn’t even noticed him before, hadn’t been aware of the beauty of his eyes and the richness of his voice. The kiss drew her in, seeming to last forever and then no time at all as he pulled away gently and studied her.

Cathy stared at him, wanting him so intensely she couldn’t understand why she’d pushed him away for so long. What kind of idiot had she been? She threaded her fingers into Will’s hair, pulling him back to her, feeling a terrific lust she’d never experienced with Josh. The more they kissed, the harder it was to remember what she’d seen in him anyway.

20

Will scanned the list of names, crossing out the ones he'd already spoken to, as Cornelius poured the sherry. He was desperate to throw himself into winning the Dukedom so he didn't have to think about what he'd done the night before. He'd hardly slept, lying next to Cathy as she was curled on her side, sleeping deeply. At first he felt satisfied he'd solved a problem, the next he even felt heroic for saving her from the impending wrath of Lord Iris. It shifted into a leaden guilt that lingered until he decided to get up and leave before she woke.

It was cowardly and he was disgusted with himself. He had arrived at the house and asked for Cornelius without his usual trip up the stairs to see Amelia. He didn't feel a need to be sated and he didn't want her to see the guilt in his eyes.

"Is that all of them?" Cornelius asked, bringing Will's mind back to the task. He crossed three more out then passed it over. "You've been busy."

Will sipped the sherry and lay the pen down. "There isn't time to waste."

"You've spoken to Tulipa, I see. What did you say?"

"That I couldn't support him because I have no choice but to stand myself."

Cornelius' eyebrows arched. "And how did that go?"

"As well as it could."

"Have you noticed anything unusual since then?"

"Like what?"

“Was it quiet on the road over today?”

Will nodded. “It’s always quiet. I don’t think I’ve ever seen another carriage. It takes some getting used to after Aquae Sulis.” Cornelius still seemed dissatisfied. “What is it?”

“I don’t think you should have told him. Now he’ll see you as a threat.”

“I could hardly do anything else. Besides, I played it down, I’m not a complete fool.”

“The Tulipas are very accomplished, Bartholomew in particular. You have to be careful now, he could take action.”

“What kind of action? Running me out of town?”

“Worse. Just because they’re polite and cultured, it doesn’t mean the Tulipas won’t resort to low forms of persuasion.”

“Are you seriously trying to tell me Bartholomew would threaten my person?” Will laughed. “The same man who charms my wife with debates on philosophy and thinks Freddy Viola is a grotesque idiot?”

“Will, please, listen to me. The Tulipas have been coveting the throne for hundreds of years. Just because you’ve had a few pleasant conversations with the man, don’t think that will protect you.”

“Don’t be absurd.”

“Don’t be complacent!” Cornelius’s voice rose. He closed his eyes as Will stared, taken aback. “I’m sorry. I feel very strongly about this. You must put an extra footman on your carriage and have them armed.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Please take my advice. If nothing else, it will put Amelia’s mind at rest as well as my own.”

Will nodded and looked back down at the list. “There’s a few left to talk to. No one has promised their support yet, but a couple seem more receptive than others. I wanted to talk to you about the Peonias.”

They discussed the list and new approaches for most of the morning. Will decided to return home for lunch so he could consult the steward about security and see if Cathy was all right. It wasn't until he was halfway back that he realised he'd neglected to see Amelia.

"Is my wife at home?" he asked Morgan as his gloves and cane were taken.

"I'm afraid not, sir, she was collected by Dame Iris shortly after eleven. I understand they are to take tea with a friend of the Dame and then have lunch."

Will nodded. "Could you send a message to the steward to see me in my study?"

The steward was a rather dour man with angular features and an unfortunate set of ears, but he was most capable and had already proven himself to be invaluable. He listened to Will's concerns and then assured him he would give it his full attention. Will felt like a bit of a fool, but Cornelius seemed to think it was necessary and he couldn't see any harm in being cautious.

He'd lunch at home, then go to Black's to see if there was an opportunity to find Oliver's cousin. He leaned back in the chair, wondering what trouble his best friend had got himself into of late. It hadn't been so long ago that they'd been travelling together, then swanning about in Aquae Sulis, enjoying the attention as the newly returned. He marvelled at how quickly his life was turning into his father's, with a household to care for and a patron to keep happy. He wondered when Nathaniel would be paired off and why it hadn't happened already. He imagined that Imogen would soon be engaged, and Sophia, well, there was no telling what would become of her.

He had a sudden urge to see his youngest sister. He remembered Sophia's tiny kisses on his cheek, the way she'd asked to be a bridesmaid, and felt an awful twist in his stomach at the thought of her left at home with the housemaid whilst the family had been at the Oak. Sophia would have loved the wedding; in fact, she was probably the only person capable of being filled with joy at the event.

There was a scrying glass in the drawer of his desk, one he kept in case of emergencies. Will lifted it out and looked at his reflection briefly before saying, "Show me Miss Sophia Reticulata-Iris."

The surface of the glass rippled in the manner he was accustomed to, then he saw his youngest sister sitting on the floor. She looked pale and thinner than he remembered, and far from happy as she combed the hair of a porcelain doll.

Will's stomach tightened, remembering her happy babble and the effortless affection she'd exuded whenever they were together. He set the glass down, went to the door and locked it, then went to the middle bookcase and pulled back the third book in from the left on the lowest shelf. There was a gentle click and it swung into the room, revealing a second door behind it set into the wall. Will retrieved the wooden key, as heavy as one made from lead, from the hidden compartment in his desk and put it in the lock. It sent a tingle up his arm as he turned it.

He pocketed the key and opened the door. He could just make out his old room in his parents' Aquae Sulis home through a haze that reminded him of the roads in Sicily during the heat of the day.

He held his breath and stepped through. When he glanced back he could see the door had already shut and locked behind him and the bookcase would be swinging back into place. When the Patroon had insisted on giving the Way as a gift, he'd been resistant to the idea, thinking the

Patroon’s generosity was a thinly veiled lack of confidence in his ability to cope in Londinium. It was nothing more than a means of enabling Will to gain advice from his father without anyone else’s knowledge. Now he was grateful he hadn’t expressed that opinion at the time.

His mother, ever conscious of the embarrassment of being surprised by an unexpected guest—even if it was her own son—insisted on a Charm being put in place to ring a bell down in the servants’ hall should the Way from Londinium be opened. The butler was hurrying up the stairs as he emerged from his room.

“Good morning, sir, what a pleasure to see you again.”

“Good morning. Is my mother here? I need to speak to her. I apologise for the lack of polite notice, but it’s important.”

“She’s entertaining guests. Perhaps you’d be kind enough to wait in the drawing room, and I’ll inform her of your arrival.”

“Is my father here?”

“I’m afraid not, sir. He’s expected back this evening.”

Will paced as he waited in the drawing room, feeling strange now he was back in his old home. He felt younger and tense in a way he hadn’t for some time. He was back on guard, ready to defend himself from his siblings and their latest attempt to ridicule or trick him.

He was brought tea, which he hadn’t the stomach for, and then shortly afterwards his mother arrived, dressed in such an elaborate dress he surmised the guests were important.

“William.” She kissed him on the cheek. “What a lovely surprise. Is everything well in Londinium?”

“Yes,” he said. “Mother, I’m here about Sophia. I want her to come and stay with us.”

It was clearly the last thing she'd expected him to say. "I beg your pardon?"

"I want her to come and live with Cathy and me. She's not happy here."

"Whatever gives you that impression?"

"I used a Glass."

"How rude!"

"She's not looking well. Is no one keeping her company? Who is looking after her?"

"Stop making such a fuss. She's fine."

"I'd like to see her."

"But that will only upset her, she misses you."

"All the more reason for her to come with me."

Mother arranged two cups on saucers, and they rattled as she did so. "William, do sit down and think about what you're suggesting. Catherine is newly married and hardly in a position to care for her, and besides, it's her first year as a new bride. She should be settling in and no doubt Dame Iris is paying her a great deal of attention."

"You're worried the Dame will find out about Sophia," Will said, sitting opposite her. "I'm not a fool, mother. We'll keep her out of the Dame's way and tell the staff she's a distant relative of mine, whose mother is sick or something."

"Is Catherine prepared to do this?"

"She'll adore Sophia, it's impossible to not love her."

Mother set the teapot down. "Oh, William. You haven't told her, have you?"

"It's not a problem," he said. "Besides, I want her to have some contact with a young child. She needs to get used to the idea of us having children and what better way to do that than see how delightful one can be?"

“William”—Mother handed him a cup of tea he still didn’t want —“you’ve got a lot to learn.”

“I can’t leave Sophia here being so miserable, it’s not right.”

She fidgeted, stirring her tea for too long. “We have guests. We’ve not been able to give her as much attention as usual, it’s true. And your father has been nervous about this for a while…the Patroon has been visiting more often since you went to Londinium. Perhaps it wouldn’t hurt to have her stay with you a little while, just whilst we’re entertaining.”

“Let me have Sophia to stay for just a month. We’ll see how she settles and how Cathy takes to her. Would you be amenable to that?”

“But what about standing for the Dukedom, won’t she be a distraction?”

“Hardly, Mother, and I rather think having her around will keep me cheerful in the midst of all the politics.”

“You really are a sweet young man, William. I hope Catherine realises how lucky she is.”

Will took to stirring his tea. “I’m sure she will.”

When the carriage finally pulled away from the restaurant, Cathy released a long sigh of relief. Finally she could accomplish something useful now that her obligation to Dame Iris was over for the day. She wanted to check her email and see if her tutor had responded. Cathy had been very apologetic, explaining that a family emergency had taken her away from her studies and that she’d be unlikely to return for a few months. She wanted to know if she’d be able to continue her studies at a distance in the interim. She’d ordered books from her reading list and arranged to pick them up at a bookshop only a short walk away. She’d also stumbled across information on P.O. Boxes, a remarkably useful mundane service which would enable

her to have a postal address separate from the anchor property. Slowly, piece by piece, Cathy felt like she was starting to make real progress. She wished she could hurry the painting Charm along as easily.

There was also a hire car to arrange so she could sneak out to find Miss Rainer. She'd already found the anchor property on Google maps and even looked at it with the satellite view. The people of Mundanus were so wonderfully advanced! Thanks to the internet she could sort out all the logistics without having to be seen leaving the house. None of the servants had noticed her going off to the nursery, as the corridor leading to it wasn't used for anything else. She smiled. The room that had made her faint was now her favourite in the house.

The time wasted with Dame Iris had been so frustrating. Cathy's cheeks ached from the hours of fake smiling and attempts to appear animated when the Dame described various embroidery projects she'd undertaken in the last year. It had been so hard not to just grab the teapot and start pouring it all over the table cloth whilst shouting every expletive she'd learnt in Mundanus. Imagining it was the only thing that enabled her to appear vaguely cheerful throughout the tedious tea with the Dame's boring friends and then lunch at a restaurant with the atmosphere of a funeral parlour in a healthy neighbourhood.

She wondered whether Will was home and the churning over of the previous evening's events started again. She felt a flicker of hope that he would be and that they'd kiss again. "Don't," she whispered to herself. "Don't fall for him, you idiot."

Cathy tried to remember the details of the conversation they'd had, but they seemed to have been pushed out by what had followed. She felt her cheeks grow hot as she remembered how it had felt. She shook her head. What had she been thinking? Then, for the hundredth time since she'd

woken up, she hoped she wasn't pregnant. How could she have been so careless?

The euphoria over finding out Miss Rainer was alive had made the champagne rush to her head and her better judgement collapse. The memories were slippery, muddied by recollections of his kisses, his touch, tempting her down mental alleyways all leading to the same rush in her chest. She needed to talk to Will and see if she really did feel differently about him. Then she changed her mind; she had to stay away from him in case she lost control again. She had to stay focused on her real goal and not be distracted by her handsome husband.

Will was likely to be running around Londinium canvassing for supporters so it was the ideal time to hide in the nursery and get things ticked off her to-do list. The only thing that stopped her worrying about his fight for the Dukedom was the sure fact that Bartholomew would win and she wouldn't have to face the awful prospect of being Duchess. Shivering at the thought, she took the footman's hand to descend the steps. The new dress hastily commissioned at the Dame's insistence wasn't the easiest to move in. Style over comfort, as always.

She smiled at Morgan despite the aching and headed straight for the stairs up to her room.

"Cathy?"

Will's voice. She gripped the handrail as her pulse soared. She tried to think of piles of horse dung, dead flies on windowsills and fried eggs, anything to take her mind from the memories he reignited.

"I'm going to have a bath, I've had a sod of a day," she called down, resolutely keeping her gaze on the stairs ahead of her.

"Come to the sitting room. There's someone you need to meet."

She sighed. “I’m not up to impressing guests. Can’t it happen another time?”

“No. Sophia is here and she wants to meet you.”

Cathy tried to remember where she’d heard that name, running through the list of wives and notables of the Londinium Court that she’d been given to learn by Dame Iris. It was twice as long as the list Will had given her shortly after they’d arrived.

“My sister,” he added.

The conversation from the night of their first soirée flooded back. The secret child. She peered over the banister and regretted it immediately. His brown hair was slightly tousled like he’d been riding and there was a glow in his cheeks that made him look far too attractive. A flash memory of his hand stroking the curve of her hip as he kissed her throat made her blush and look away from him.

“Cathy? Are you coming down?”

“Why is she here? Are your parents visiting?”

“No. Sophia’s going to stay with us for a little while.” He walked round to the bottom stair, extended a hand towards her. “You’ll love her. I promise.”

“Does she have a nanny?” She didn’t take his hand for fear of throwing herself into a passionate clinch.

“Not yet. I was hoping you could spend time with her when I’m not here. She was being neglected in Aquae Sulis.”

The thought of looking after a child triggered memories of miserable afternoons with Elizabeth throwing tantrums. But those afternoons had been spent in Mundanus. The beginning of a plan formed, involving a day trip to Kew Gardens without the need to hide it from Will. “I’d be happy to play with her in Mundanus, if that’s what she needs.”

Will’s face was made divine by a bright smile. He climbed the stairs between them, slipped a hand around her waist and kissed her firmly on the lips.

The smell of his skin rekindled the memories of the night before. She kissed him back before she realised what she was doing. “Um—” she pulled away slightly “—what about keeping her a secret?”

“I’ve told the staff she’s a distant cousin of mine.”

Hidden in plain sight all of her life and ushered away when anyone visited. Cathy almost wished she’d had the same childhood, free of the pressure of performance.

Then she knew what to paint to satisfy Lord Poppy. She would put Sophia in the painting, but not as the subject and—as in real life—tucked away somewhere unobtrusive. Poppy hadn’t specified that the secret would have to be obvious, or divulged at the point of delivery. In fact, she was certain he would be happier left to wonder what it was, thereby satisfying him without betraying Will’s trust or endangering the child. As long as the Charm arrived on time, there was still hope she could navigate safely through Poppy’s trap.

Will was smiling at her and she realised he was reflecting her own expression. He gently pulled her back and kissed her again. “I like being like this with you. It’s the way it’s supposed to be.”

“You weren’t there when I woke up.”

“I’m sorry, my love, I had an early meeting. I didn’t want to wake you.”

Cathy stared at him, processing what he’d called her. She felt giddy and stupid and increasingly annoyed with herself. Why—

“Come on,” Will said, taking her hand and pulling her down the stairs.

“Will, about last night,” she started, but when she reached the bottom he called for Sophia and picked up the pace.

He took her to one of the sitting rooms. Sophia was almost at the door when they arrived, having heard his call. Cathy saw the way she beamed at Will and how it delighted him to sweep the little girl up into his arms and bring her face level with theirs.

“Sophia, this is Cathy.”

“Your Cathy?” she asked him.

“My Cathy,” he smiled and they both looked at her. She could see the resemblance between them instantly.

“Hello,” Sophia said, and, as much as she thought she was immune to cute children, Cathy did find herself warming to her.

“Hello,” Cathy replied. “Will tells me you’re going to stay with us a while.”

Sophia nodded eagerly, making her ringlets bounce. “I missed Will-yum. Will you take me to the park when he has to do grown-up things?”

“Of course I will, I love parks. And there’s one I’ve always wanted to visit where the trees are hundreds of years old. Would you like to go and see them and have ice-cream too?”

Sophia nodded enthusiastically. “Yes, please. Let’s go now!”

“We’ll go first thing tomorrow. I need to work out how to get there first.”

“Oh. Do you want to play dolls with me?”

Cathy wrinkled her nose. “No, thanks. Maybe later we could make paper aeroplanes together.”

“Do princesses make paper aeroplanes?”

“Only the best ones,” Cathy said and it seemed to satisfy Sophia. She was less than five years old and already being programmed into only wanting to do “girly” things. Cathy resolved to present some alternative interests to her.

Will kissed Sophia on the cheek and put her down. She returned to the rug and the three dolls in varying states of disarray. Cathy then felt his eyes on her and looked back at him. His smile was soft and he brushed her hand. “Thank you.”

She knew what he was thinking. There was the beautiful child, quiet and well-behaved. Here was his wife, and soon she would be pregnant and full of the delights of motherhood, especially after having the opportunity to spend time with the sweetest child in Society. There was no way in the Worlds Will wanted to be with her for any reason other than furthering the family line, even without the beautiful Rosa hidden away somewhere. Did he touch Amelia in the same way? Did he kiss his wife like he kissed the rose?

“I need to change and make the arrangements for our trip,” she said, anxious to get away from him and the plans he had for her. She’d lost her virginity and the next time Will made overtures towards her it would be harder to turn him down. There was no way she could stay in the Nether and have babies under Dame Iris’s intense scrutiny. No. It was time to find Miss Rainer and step up her plans for escape before Will had made another child to fall in love with.

21

Sam liked to think of himself as a reasonable man, one who could get through life without having to punch anyone to make a point. The concierge was challenging that self-image. Not only did he feel like punching the smartly dressed jobsworth, he also felt like knocking down anyone else who wanted to keep him away from Leanne.

“Look, for the tenth time, it’s a fucking emergency,” he said, slowly losing control of his voice. “She’s my wife, you don’t have the right to stop me from seeing her.”

“I’m sorry,” the man said, no longer calling him “sir”. “Mrs Westonville made it very clear to me that under no circumstances was I permitted to let you see her.”

“That’s because she didn’t know what I know now! If she knew what I know, I know she’d see me in a shot.” He sounded like a lunatic. Sam pressed his hands down on the top of the horseshoe-shaped desk-cum-booth the concierge sat behind, reminding himself not to use them to wallop him. “Look, I know you’re just doing your job, and you might think you’re protecting a vulnerable woman, but I’m trying to protect her and you’re doing more harm than good.”

“If you don’t leave, I’m going to call the police.”

“For what?”

“Trespassing. Breach of the peace. Being a pain in the jacksy. I know divorce is hard, but you don’t live here, she does, so I’m on her side.” He waited for Sam to move. “Right, that’s it.”

The concierge lifted a phone handset from its cradle and Sam patted the air. “I’m going, for fuck’s sake. But if anything happens to her—”

“Yeah, yeah, you’ll hold me personally responsible. I’ve seen the same films as you. Now piss off. Sir.”

Sam sucked in a deep lungful of air through his teeth. Now he understood why people flipped out. “Twat,” he said loudly, heading for the door. He’d wait on the pavement outside until she came out. It didn’t matter if he had to stand in a doorway all night, he had to warn her about Neugent.

She’d stopped taking his calls after sending a text saying, “Nothing to say, give me a break for at least a month.” He left a voicemail asking her to call, saying it was urgent. She didn’t. On the train up to London he’d hammered the redial button, thinking that surely she’d get the idea that this was more than just him panicking about a separation. He suspected she wasn’t even using that number any more. That was what she’d do: switch it off, get a new phone and new number and get on with her job. She kept different parts of her life in separate mental boxes. For a long time he’d been in the crappy battered one left in the corner whilst she played with the big shiny work box. Now he felt as if she’d put him into one of his own, one she was soon to throw out altogether.

He rubbed his eyes. As the adrenalin from his confrontation with the concierge ebbed he became aware of the fatigue again. He’d been suffering from varying degrees of panic since the conversation with Max and the gargoyle.

Sam ducked into the doorway of a generic office building out of the concierge’s line of sight and looked at his wedding ring. He still wore it, even after everything that had been said about it. He wasn’t divorced yet. Taking it off seemed too premature, and too final.

At the sound of high heels clipping on the pavement he peered round and saw Leanne, handbag over her shoulder, wearing a brilliant red coat. She'd lost even more weight and her legs were starting to look too thin.

"Leanne!" He stepped out a few metres ahead of her.

"The concierge told me you'd been a pain in the arse."

"I need to talk to you, Lee, it's important."

She started walking again, eyes fixed on a point past his shoulder. "You've got until I get to the tube station."

He fell into step alongside her. "Are you OK? You've lost too much weight, you know, you're wasting away."

"Good start, Sam, offend me, that's bound to make me more receptive."

"Shit. Sorry, I'm just worried about you, that's all. Look, there's something wrong with this thing you've got with Neugent. A friend looked into the forge and there were other people who made their rings there and ten of them died before their time."

She frowned at him, not slowing. "Do you realise how pathetic you sound? 'This thing I've got with Neugent'? You mean a career? And what the hell have those people got to do with me?"

"They all worked for Neugent, Lee. It's a pattern."

"Oh, right, so after realising what you've lost you've cooked up some amazingly shit story to try and frighten me into resigning so I'll move back to Bath? That's really sad."

"Are you even listening to me? They died!"

"Of what?"

"Well, different things but—"

"Oh, so you've carried out a detailed statistical analysis of all of the people who have ever had any contact with Marcus who happened to make their own wedding rings and concluded that dying is weird? Do you know

how many people work for him? Do you know how many people have used that forge? Do you know how statistically unlikely it is that a failed marriage could be repaired by husbands making outlandish claims about their wife's boss?"

"They all died too young!"

"By whose standards? Thousands of children die every day. Show me your analysis and explain to me which age you define as the correct time to die. Oh, that's right, it doesn't exist."

"I'm trying to protect you, Lee, that's all. I know you're in danger."

"I'm in danger of telling you to fuck off before we get to the station, I'll give you that."

"I'm serious. I know I can be a dick sometimes but even I wouldn't come up with something like this to try and patch things up, would I? I thought we'd just had our time together and I was happy to move on, because I didn't know there was anything else involved."

She stopped and looked at him. "What is this about, Sam? Do you need help?"

"I'm trying to tell you, *you* need help! You need to come back to Bath with me. We can talk. No, even better, we'll go somewhere else… Cornwall…Scotland, wherever you want to go, and we'll talk it all through and we'll start again."

She closed her eyes. He wanted to touch her but she wasn't giving the impression that would be allowed. "Sam," she said with a sigh, "you're assuming we have something to try to save here. We don't. I've changed, you haven't. I don't see any point in stringing this along any more. I'll get in touch with my solicitor, let's just divorce as quickly and cleanly as we can so we can move on."

"I don't want that."

“Sorry. There’s nothing I can do about that. Let it go. You’ll be happier without me, you really will.”

“No, I won’t.” Sam felt like a child, powerless in the face of a diktat from a parent, something non-negotiable and world-breaking and utterly out of his control.

“I have to go or I’ll be late. Get some help, Sam, talk to a counsellor or something, but don’t try and suck me into this car crash.”

“I’m not your problem anymore, is that it?”

“More that I don’t want to be yours anymore. My solicitor will be in touch.”

She walked off, leaving him standing on a London pavement with people tutting as they had to walk around him. He watched her, not knowing whether to run after her or stop believing all this stuff anyway. Filtered through her it did sound stupid. But he still believed it and he still wanted to protect her, even though she’d made it clear there was nothing she felt for him other than irritation and pity. If he pursued her, she’d get angry again and it wouldn’t achieve anything. He could feel a surge of panic and impotence threatening to make him do something stupid like throw her over his shoulder or burst into tears. Neither was acceptable. He rubbed his eyes as he lost sight of her and decided the only sensible thing to do was go and get pissed.

Cathy parked the hire car a short walk away from the house where Miss Rainer worked and twisted round to check on Sophia.

“She’s fast asleep,” Lucy said.

“Thanks for coming to help,” Cathy said, smiling, and felt the nerves catch her breath. “I’ll be as quick as I can, then afterwards we’ll go to Kew

Gardens and wake her up. She won't even know we've been here."

"I'll keep an eye on her, don't worry," Lucy replied. "Go, and good luck!"

Cathy closed the car door as quietly as she could and looked up and down the mundane suburban street. It was lined with trees still clinging to the last of their autumnal leaves and parked cars ready for the daily commute. Bathed in the grey light of the pre-dawn, the silent street made Cathy long for Manchester again and the fresh potential that filled every early morning there.

The painting Charm had arrived late the previous evening, locked in a box, and delivered to the house by a young boy. The key had arrived by Letterboxer soon afterward. Inside the box was a beautiful turquoise bottle made of Venetian glass—she knew the Shopkeeper only used it for the most expensive Charms—with a flame-shaped stopper, along with a tiny sable brush. An accompanying note read;

Catherine,

You are officially the first customer to receive such a rare and expensive Charm without having paid for it first. I trust you will come to see me to discuss the price at your earliest convenience.

Should you have need of the Charm before then, you should know this: its effects will last anywhere between twenty-four hours and twenty-four days, depending on how much affinity your own abilities have with one of the critical ingredients. Side-effects include insomnia, mania, depression, hallucinations—auditory and visual—and becoming a bore. I beg you to arrange for private time away from guests and social obligations before you use it.

When you have your materials to hand and are ready to create, simply dip the brush into the bottle and paint its contents onto your eyelids, the skin above your heart, the palms of your hands and lastly your fingertips. You may experience the customary tingling associated with powerful magic.

I hope it is sufficient for your needs, and look forward to seeing you at the Emporium forthwith.

Yours sincerely,

S.

Cathy was eager to use it but, fearful the side-effects would render her useless in the search for Miss Rainer, she decided to wait until the day was over. Early morning would be the best time to find her. As a scullery maid it would be Rainer's responsibility to draw the water for the household's morning routine. In the past that would have involved carrying buckets to a hand pump but now that Mundanus had entered the modern age it meant Miss Rainer would be filling buckets in the anchor property's kitchen to take through into the Nether reflection of the house.

The thought of her tutor's brilliant mind being squandered on menial tasks infuriated Cathy. There was no way she would let the Agency continue to treat her this way and if they proved to be a problem then Cathy planned to help Rainer escape into Mundanus too.

The house was a detached Victorian villa on three storeys and was a rather modest anchor property. Cathy didn't know anyone from the Ranunculus family personally but she knew they weren't the most successful of the Great Families and were often overlooked. They hadn't made Dame Iris's list of important people to know in Londinium and Cathy envied their anonymity.

After one last glance up the street Cathy hurried up the sloped driveway and darted down the side of the house. The kitchen would be at the rear, overlooking the back garden, and out of sight of the neighbours. The side gate was locked but not too high to be climbed over and Cathy dropped onto the other side feeling like an amateur burglar.

There were French doors that led onto the garden but the curtains were still drawn so she couldn't see into the house. Cathy tiptoed across to crouch beneath the kitchen window and listen for any noises within. Just as she was about to peep over the windowsill there was the muffled clank of a metal bucket being put into the sink and the sound of water splashing into it.

Cathy slowly curled her fingertips over the windowsill and raised herself up to peep over the edge of the window frame, just in case Miss Rainer wasn't the one drawing the water that morning.

But it was her! Her hair was different, now tied back in a tight bun, and she looked more pale and tired than Cathy remembered but it was definitely Miss Rainer. Cathy straightened up and tapped on the window excitedly. Miss Rainer jumped but didn't drop the empty bucket she was holding.

Cathy searched for the flash of recognition and the smile she'd imagined receiving upon their reunion but there was nothing of the sort on Rainer's face. Perhaps it was hard for her to see out into the murky dawn with the lights on inside. Cathy pointed at the back door and Miss Rainer nodded, setting down the bucket to go over and unlock it.

"Miss Rainer!" Cathy whispered as soon as the door opened.

"Can I help you?"

Cathy's exuberance imploded. "It's me, Catherine. Your student."

Miss Rainer's eyes narrowed and looked up in the way they used to when she was considering the best way to explain a difficult concept.

“Catherine? That name’s familiar…did we work at the same house once?”

Cathy struggled to speak as her chest tightened. “You were my governess for over ten years!”

“I’m a scullery maid, Miss Catherine. Do you want me to fetch the governess for you?”

“No! You were mine, don’t you remember?” Cathy wanted to grab her shoulders and shake her until Miss Rainer looked and spoke like her old self again. It was like speaking to nothing but a physical copy of her and it was terrifying. “I was called Catherine Rhoeas-Papaver then, we lived in Bath—in Aquae Sulis—don’t you remember?”

“Papaver…” Rainer whispered and Cathy thought she could see something of her governess in her features, just for a moment. “That is familiar…”

“You gave me *The Time Machine* by H.G. Wells and we talked about it for hours. You taught me about Emmeline Pankhurst and Virginia Woolf and Aphra Behn! Don’t you remember any of it?”

Miss Rainer’s brow creased. “You’re upset.”

“Of course I am!” Cathy croaked. “You were everything to me. You made me what I am!”

“Catherine Rhoeas-Papaver…” Miss Rainer said again and looked down. “The floor.” She pointed at a patio flagstone. “Something important in the floor.”

“What do you mean?” Cathy felt a glimmer of hope again. The Agency had done something terrible to her, but something remained, she was sure of it. Perhaps she’d been drugged. If she could get her away from the house and somewhere safe—

“Something important,” Miss Rainer said and bent down to take off her shoe.

Cathy felt sick as she watched the broken shadow of her hero fumble with a stocking and peel it off her leg. She wanted to find Bennet and smash his face into a wall until he confessed what they did to make her this way. She wanted to go to Elizabeth and dangle her out of a window by her hair until she really understood how much hurt she'd caused by telling Father about Miss Rainer's unorthodox lessons.

"Catherine." Miss Rainer's voice pulled her out of her rage. Rainer was now sitting on the back step with one foot bare, her skirt hitched above her knee. She was pointing at a scar on her thigh in the rough shape of a diamond. "Something important in the floor."

"What does that mean?" Cathy crouched down. "Who did that to you?"

"Me," Rainer replied. "To remember."

"Remember what?" The vacant shrug of Rainer's shoulders made her want to cry.

Cathy pulled the hem of the skirt down to cover the scar and restore Miss Rainer's modesty. She threw her arms around her shoulders. "I'm so sorry. I'll find out what they did to you and I'll make you better, I promise. I swear it, Miss Rainer, I swear I will." She wept.

"Shhh." Miss Rainer patted her back awkwardly. "Don't cry. I'm fit as a fiddle. But I do have to go, otherwise I'll get into trouble."

Cathy released her and helped Miss Rainer to stand after she'd put her stocking back on. "Do you remember me at all?"

"You're…familiar," Miss Rainer finally replied but Cathy wasn't sure if she only said that to make her feel better. "But it doesn't matter, not as much as you think."

"What does matter?"

Miss Rainer looked up at the sky again. "The work," she finally replied and, after an uncertain smile, went back into the house and locked the door.

Cathy stumbled out of the garden and over the side gate. She walked a little way down the road before she had to sit on the kerb with her head in her hands. She let the grief take her, unable to hold it inside any more.

Cars drove past and a woman out walking her dog stopped to ask if she was all right. Cathy mumbled a lie to evade any further attention and dried her eyes as the woman carried on. Cathy watched the dog snuffling at the kerb and breathed in the morning air, steadying herself. She couldn't run away, not now, not knowing what she did. Then she was grieving for a life she knew she could never have again.

Eventually, Cathy stood and blew her nose. "Time to stop pissing about," she whispered to herself and went back to the car as her thoughts settled around a different plan of action. Sophia was still asleep and Lucy was supposedly reading a guide to flower arranging.

"How'd it go?" Lucy asked as Cathy got in and put her seatbelt on. "Did you find her?"

"No," Cathy replied. "But I found something important." She looked over her shoulder at Lucy. "You were right about me. I thought I was the only woman who doesn't fit in. I think I liked that, because I thought I was better than everyone for seeing through it all. I was so obsessed with getting out that I didn't give a sod about anyone else. That was selfish; I see that now. I've been a childish idiot."

Lucy reached forward to squeeze her shoulder gently. "You thought you were alone, but you're not, do you see?"

"Oh, I see all right. I'm not going to run away again." Even as she said the words they caught in her throat. "I can't, there's too much to be done in the Nether. It's not just the way women are treated—the Agency is dodgy as fuck and they're doing terrible things to people and I've just ignored it all. We shouldn't be treating people that way, not in the twenty-first century."

Lucy grinned. “You said it.”

Cathy tried to smile back but the thought of staying in the Nether to fight the patriarchy and unearth the secrets of the Agency made her feel sick to the stomach. She wasn’t cut out for this, she wasn’t a great thinker or a great writer. She was just an angry woman who read weird books and couldn’t handle life in Society. How could she make a difference?

But maybe that’s what all of those women before her had thought before they went on to fight the system. They had found the strength and the courage to speak up and challenge the establishment despite the impact on their own lives. Rainer had taken a terrible risk to teach her things she wasn’t supposed to know and had lost everything as a result. Cathy knew that if she gave in to her own fear it would make Miss Rainer’s suffering worthless.

She just had to be brave and work hard. “The work” as Rainer had said it echoed in Cathy’s mind. Yes, she thought, that is the most important thing. The work.

22

The potion tasted faintly of onions. It burned Cathy’s throat as it went down like the rough whisky she’d tried at an awful student party in Manchester. The canvas and paints were laid out before her and she’d told Morgan to bring her tea every hour, on the hour, until she retired. She had no idea how long it would take to paint the picture for Lord Poppy, nor any idea where to start. She’d only just managed to stop crying about the state Miss Rainer was in now. She had to satisfy Poppy if she wanted a chance to help her.

Then, as the burning faded in her chest, she knew where to put the first line. Cathy picked up the pencil and began sketching out the Royal Crescent in Bath, barely looking at the book she’d obtained to guide her. By the time Morgan arrived with the first round of tea, the shape of the painting was described in faint graphite lines and she knew exactly what to do next.

“Morgan,” she said as she reached for the brush, “I'm going to need cake. Lots of cake.’

Amelia listened for footsteps on the stairs, knowing that Will was expected for another late morning meeting with Cornelius. She’d wasted days and lost sleep wondering why he’d snubbed her after his last meeting with her brother. Now she was busy at the dressing table trying to hide the shadows under her eyes with makeup.

Loud thuds sounded more like Cornelius in a rush. She sighed and applied her blusher, trying not to see it as painting her face like a whore.

He still managed to knock, but entered before she'd even called him in. "Cornelius!"

He shut the door. "Will's on his way."

She twisted round to frown at him. "I know." His fist was clenched around a note. "What's that?"

He strode over to the fire and threw the single piece of letter paper onto it. He didn't answer until he was satisfied it was ash. "I'm not going to tell you what it said, only how it affects you. Darling, we must keep Will here today."

"How long for?"

"As long as we can. I can occupy him for an hour or two easily. When I send for mid-morning refreshments you must come and join us and persuade him to spend some time with you."

"He didn't seem interested when he last visited."

"There's a lot to distract him, so you must be persuasive today."

She stared at her reflection in the mirror. She did look like a whore.

"I'm sorry to ask, but it's critical." He came over and kissed the curls arranged to emphasise her slender neck. "Not long now, darling. We'll look back on this time and marvel at how awful it was, and how it never will be like it again. I promise."

She nodded as the sound of the bell downstairs made him dart to the door. "I won't let you down, Cornelius." She made herself smile at the kiss he blew to her and listened to him going back down the stairs more slowly. She heard him greet Will casually, like everything was normal.

Amelia looked down at her trembling hands. She knew why she had to keep him there: to keep him away from Catherine. It was the day everything would change for Will, for Cornelius and ultimately for her. She knew it would take time for Will to recover from the death of his wife, but not as

long as someone in love would take. Amelia was used to playing the long game. She could wait.

As she checked her face in the mirror, she wondered what Thorn would do to Catherine. A frown creased the skin above her nose and she swiftly corrected it. She didn't want Catherine to suffer. She hoped it would be quick and painless, like one would slaughter a beast for meat. She closed her eyes. What a perfectly despicable thing to think.

She thought back to the brief conversation she'd tried to have with Catherine on the night everything collapsed in Aquae Sulis. She only wanted to check that the glamours used to disguise the Lavandula décor had been done to perfection, simply to put her mind at rest.

There was also curiosity about Will's fiancée and the need to check Catherine wasn't going to be a problem. It was clear early in their conversation that she cared nothing for Will and seemed to be in a strange world of her own, incapable of having the most basic of conversations without tripping up. How the families could have decided she was the best match for Will still confounded Amelia. Will was evidently destined for great things—why pair him off with someone as plain and incapable as Catherine?

Satisfied she looked as good as possible, Amelia went to the cheval mirror and inspected her outfit. It wouldn't do. It had been selected for an average day, not one when she'd have to use everything in her arsenal. She chose another and then rang for the maid, all the while worrying about the tiny amount of perfume left in the bottle. Once she had more freedom it would be a trifling matter to obtain the Charm from the Shopkeeper again. She had no idea how long that would be and whether there would be another time she'd need it more before then. Having control over Will's affections as he grieved would be critical.

The maid arrived and helped change her clothes and tidied her hair. Half an hour had passed already. “Would you be so kind as to let me know when Cornelius rings for elevenses? I’d like to join them instead of taking it in my room today.”

“Yes, ma’am.” The maid curtsied and left Amelia to pace the room and obsess about the perfume. Before long, she was informed of the request for tea and after one last check of her reflection she descended the stairs and went to the drawing room.

“I thought my friendship with Oli, not to mention my helping his family, would count for something.” Will sounded irritated. “I can only imagine Peonia has had his head filled with absurd promises by the Wisteria idiot.”

“May I join you?” Amelia asked as the tea and sandwiches were brought in.

Will stood; she offered her hand and he kissed it. It was the first time she’d been in a room with both her lover and her brother and she didn’t like the way it made her feel obliged to act in two different ways at once.

“Trouble with the Wisterias?” she asked, seating herself next to Cornelius so she could flirt with Will without her brother seeing every detail.

“And the Peonias,” Will said. “They’ve teamed up and are being perfectly odious.”

Amelia poured the tea, taking the opportunity to put herself at the centre of attention. It had worked so well in Aquae Sulis Will had positively slavered at the sight of her. But today he seemed distant and when she looked up from the teapot he wasn’t even looking at her. He looked very tired. Perhaps the strain was taking its toll.

“I’m sure you and Cornelius can think of a way to bring them round.”

Amelia handed Will his tea, brushing his finger as he took it, but he didn't even notice. He dropped a lump of sugar in, stirred and stared at the fire. She should have used the perfume.

Cornelius seemed unconcerned, but he didn't notice such details. "They're simply trying to feel like they're part of the game," he said, taking a sandwich from the stand. "Let them play. When it's time to commit they'll realise how foolish it would be to ignore your generosity."

"But together they're a sizeable faction in the Court and they know it." Will drank the tea in three gulps, alerting Amelia to an impending announcement of his departure. "Well," he began, putting the cup and saucer on the table, "I'll give it some thought and we'll revisit it tomorrow, Cornelius."

He stood and Amelia did the same. "William," she said, trying not to seem flustered, "could I possibly speak to you in private for a moment?"

Will looked at her, as if properly noticing her for the first time. "Of course," he said with a smile, but there was still a distance between them.

He didn't touch her as she led him up the stairs to her room, but just followed in silence. When they reached her bedroom she gestured for him to come in and then closed the door.

"Is something wrong?" he asked.

"I missed you yesterday." She said it with a smile, not wanting to make him feel guilty. "I know you're very busy, but it's good to pause every now and again, is it not?"

He looked more tired now she was closer to him. "I have a lot on my mind."

"Can Cornelius help?"

"With some of it."

It wasn’t just the Dukedom that had been worrying him. Unsurprising that an inadequate wife would cause him no end of worry at such a critical time.

“Perhaps I can help you, in my own way.” She approached slowly, watching every minute movement, trying to gauge whether he would accept contact. She got close enough to reach out and touch his arm before he looked at her properly.

“I’m not good company at the moment, Amelia,” he said, clasping her hand briefly before letting it go.

“Only because you’re burdened.” She took a step closer. “Let me take your mind off things for just a little while, then you can return to your business refreshed and ready to demolish any difficulty with the silly Peonias.”

She kissed him, but there was no passion so she slipped her arms around his waist, looking at the atomiser on the table and cursing her poor decision.

He did hold her, and gradually, as if remembering who she was, he adjusted his arms so that he enveloped her more fully. “I’m sorry,” he whispered. “I know you’re lonely, and how much you miss being in Society.”

She tilted her head back and they kissed again. Better this time, but it still didn’t convince her he was planning to stay. Usually he would be steering her to the bed, eager to start unbuttoning and unlacing, but he was still withdrawn.

She pulled away and looked up at him. “What is it? This isn’t just the Dukedom, Will. There’s something else, isn’t there?”

“It’s nothing.” He kissed her but she knew it was simply to cut off the conversation.

“You look so tired, darling. Why don’t you tell me about it? Perhaps I can help.” Still nothing. “Is it Catherine?”

He broke the embrace and she knew she’d made a mistake. “I should go.”

“Talk to me, Will. I can help.”

“Amelia.” His was not the voice of a lover. “I don’t think it would be appropriate to discuss my home life with you. And if you do, you’re mistaken. Now if you’ll excuse me.”

He headed for the door. Amelia went to the dressing table and brushed her fingertip against the mouth of the atomiser. There was enough residue to make her skin tingle and she touched it to her neck. “Will, I’m sorry, please don’t leave like this.”

She rushed over as his hand was on the door handle. The panic made her flushed and the heat lifted the scent from her skin to waft about him. She watched his pupils dilate and then kissed him. She was met with renewed passion, a new urgency to his kiss as he pulled her tight to him.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered into her hair as she kissed his throat. “Let me stay.”

“Of course,” she said, drawing him away from the door. “Stay as long as you wish, my love.”

Sam found Cathy where he’d left her, sitting on the bench in a children’s play area in Green Park, looking at an iPad. As he approached, a little girl ran up to her and they had a brief conversation before the girl ran over to some other children playing on a roundabout.

“I’m back,” he said, making Cathy jump.

She powered down the tablet and slipped it into a case. “How did it go?” She patted the bench next to her. “Take a seat. You look like you need it.”

“I do.” He sat down. One of the children on the roundabout started to cry and was carried off. “You don’t look so great yourself.”

“Thanks.” She yawned. “It’s the come-down I suppose, I drank more potions than cups of tea. And not sleeping for three days. What did *he* say?”

“Oh, the usual arse.”

“About the painting?”

“He didn’t look at it.” He nodded at the amazement, then anger, that flashed across her face. “I know. All that and he didn’t even look. He said it wasn’t the right time to see it.” He hadn’t looked at it himself, as they’d agreed, fearing Poppy would take offence. All he knew was that it was a huge, heavy canvas rolled in a wide tube over six feet long. He’d had to carry it on one shoulder. “But he did say he was satisfied you’d fulfilled your contract.”

She let out a loud, drawn-out sigh and looked even more tired. “Thank God for that. He didn’t mess you about, did he?”

“No, he said he had something important to arrange.”

She bit her lip. “I just hope it doesn’t have anything to do with us.”

“Cathy! Watch me!” The girl called from the roundabout.

“Who’s the kid?”

“My husband’s cousin.”

He watched another child snivelling his way across to his mother, holding his hand out. At least there weren’t any children involved in his mess with Leanne.

“So in your message you said that something’s going on with your wife,” Cathy said.

“I’m sorry about that. I was drunk.” He’d woken in a crappy hotel down the road with a hangover that had made Exilium even more difficult to cope with. When he got the call from Cathy to say the painting was ready with only a few hours left to spare, he’d noticed the phone battery was low. He checked the call log and found he’d made repeated calls to Leanne’s mobile throughout the small hours and then a call to Cathy’s. He couldn’t remember any of them.

“So what’s this about your wife’s boss killing people?”

Sam explained it all to her, from the dodgy apartment and him losing his job through to the people with the same wedding rings dying young. When he finished she rested a gloved hand over his briefly. “I can see why you’re so upset.”

“You don’t think I’m over-reacting?”

“No. In fact—”

“Cathy.” The small girl was back and tugging gently on Cathy’s coat. “Please can you play with me?”

“I thought you were playing with the other children,” Cathy said.

“They’ve all gone.”

Sam had been so engrossed in spilling his guts to Cathy he hadn’t noticed all the other families had left. He could see one of the mothers hurrying away, her child limpeted to her, weeping. “Did they all hurt themselves?”

The child nodded. “I didn’t do anything. Cathy, can you play with me now?”

But Cathy wasn’t looking at her. Sam followed her gaze to a figure approaching them wearing a grey coat with a half cape about its shoulders. It looked like something out of a film to Sam, or something worn by a student with aspirations to be a modern-day dandy. The man’s face was

unremarkable, his brown hair long enough to be tied back in a ponytail. Eyes fixed on Cathy, he undid the top three buttons, partially revealing an embroidered waistcoat. Cathy stood up.

“I don’t like this, he’s a Fae-touched,” she had time to say, just before the man drew out a stiletto dagger.

“Fuck!” Sam jumped to his feet too.

“Sophia, run!” Cathy yelled and the child bolted for nearby bushes.

Sam didn’t move for a second, watching the man cross the park as if he were watching a film; it felt too unreal to spur him into action.

A terrible high-pitched screech came from the child. Sam spun around to see her tangled in rose briars reaching out of the ground like the tentacles of a sea monster. Sam gawped as the thorns tore into the girl’s legs, piercing her coat and reaching for her throat.

Cathy sprinted over to her, grabbed the creepers that were about to choke the child and held them off, blood blooming on her pale-blue gloves. The man was heading straight for her. The sight of the knife being raised into the air kickstarted something deep in Sam’s instincts and he threw himself into the attacker’s path, brandishing his left hand in front of him.

“I’m protected by Lord Iron!” he yelled.

The man shook his head, as if Sam were nothing but a stupid child. “Always where you should not be,” he muttered, and grasped him by the neck with his left hand. There was a brief and terrible crushing sensation and before he fully registered he was in the air, Sam landed a few feet away on his side.

The moment after he landed Sam felt a horrific pain in his left arm and chest. Then he fell sideways like he’d been rolled off something moving beneath him. As he tried to look, his head hit one of the uprights in the iron railings marking the edge of the play area. He felt blood running down his

arm and saw it dripping onto what looked like one of the iron bars, which seemed to have been bent beneath him. Then he heard Cathy cry out.

She was crouched between the attacker and the child, whose high-pitched scream sounded more like a football referee's whistle. The man had just slashed at Cathy but she'd brought up her arms to defend herself and the girl. There was a gash in her gloves, which were now more deep red than pale blue.

Not even thinking about what he was doing, Sam reached down with his right hand and grasped the iron bar. It felt warm and malleable and broke away from its point in the railings easily. The metal was slick with his blood. Its finial was shaped like an arrowhead and with every passing moment it felt more like a spear.

The assailant kicked Cathy under the chin, sending her sprawling into the tangle of thorns, and made a swift downward strike. Sam threw the spear at the same moment as he heard the sickening thud of the attacker's hand hitting her chest after the dagger was plunged in up to its hilt.

The spear curved slightly in the air and struck the man in the side, knocking him over and leaving the stiletto embedded in Cathy's chest. The man pulled out the spear but when he struggled to his feet he looked completely different. And horribly familiar. He was one of the brothers who had carried the body out of the museum that night when it all started. His limbs were far too long and thin. Thorn looked at Sam for a second, long enough for him to see the black almond eyes, then fled into the undergrowth.

Cathy wasn't moving and Sam wasn't sure he could either. Sweat prickled across his face. It was hard to breathe and he felt cold. His phone was lying in reach so he dialled 999, asked for an ambulance and police. In between short painful gasps he explained he'd been attacked, a woman had

been stabbed and a child was hurt. As he gave their location he fought the urge to just close his eyes and drift off. When he was reassured help was on the way Sam hung up, planning to call Leanne and leave her a message. His hand was barely able to keep a grip on the phone and his thumb had become putty.

He let his arm drop. The girl was now calling Cathy's name with a gut-wrenching desperation. "It's all right," he wanted to say, but his lips felt like rubber and his voice was nothing but a pathetic wheeze. Cathy still wasn't moving.

His phone started to vibrate. Sam managed to lift it enough to see Leanne's name on the caller ID as his vision tunnelled to black.

23

Will kissed the inside of Amelia’s thigh in a cave of lacy petticoat layers. He enjoyed the way she squirmed beneath his fingertips, the little gasps as his kisses moved higher and higher up her leg. He should have been at Black’s, or at home, solving the problems that plagued him, but she had been irresistible. He just had to have her, then and there, before he could think clearly again.

The brief pain in his left hand made him prod the wedding ring with his thumb as he teased her, thinking his slightly awkward position had caused the skin to be pinched by the band. A few kisses later and it felt like it was constricting. It rapidly became too painful to ignore.

He emerged from her skirts to inspect his hand. The band looked no different but his finger throbbed.

“What’s wrong?” Amelia propped herself up on her elbows. Her cheeks were deliciously flushed and her hair was a pleasant tumble around her face.

Will twisted the ring and it tingled at his touch. “I don’t know.” He wondered where Cathy was and whether she was feeling the same. He looked down at Amelia, her toe playfully exploring his belly button, and feared the ring was reacting to his infidelity. Was that even possible? Why was it happening now and not all the other times he’d been with Amelia?

Then he realised it was the first time he’d bedded her since he and Cathy had consummated the marriage. His lust evaporated.

“William.” Amelia beckoned to him.

But Will was distracted by the sudden racing of his heart and a sense of panic that had burst into his awareness out of nowhere. “Something’s not right.” He flattened down her petticoats and climbed off the bed. He pulled on his underwear and breeches hurriedly, fearing a summons from his patron any minute. Why hadn’t his father warned him of this?

“Will!” Amelia groaned. “I’ve only just got those off you!”

He took a breath to speak but a sudden, terrible pain filled his chest, making him fall back against the dressing table in his surprise. It was excruciating, stealing the air from his lungs and making blue pinpricks of light appear at the edge of his vision.

“Will!” Amelia cried, frantically tying a robe over her chemise and petticoats. “What’s wrong?”

Will squeezed his eyes shut, not daring to speak until the worst of the pain had passed. He looked down at his bare chest, expecting to see a wound, but his skin was unharmed. Just as quickly, the pain faded.

There was a loud pop and the faerie that had spoken to him in the carriage appeared in front of him. “What are you doing here?” it squealed. “You need to be with your wife! She’s dying!”

“What?” Will felt like his stomach was falling through the floor.

“She hasn’t had a child yet. How could you be so careless!”

“What are you talking about? Where is she?”

“In a green place in Mundanus.”

Will threw his shirt over his head and fumbled with the sleeves, feeling sick. His sword was at home. What was Cathy doing in…then he remembered Sophia. “Take me to her.”

“No, Will!” Amelia said. “It’s not safe. What if it’s a plot to draw you out and kill you!”

Sobered, Will nodded. “Find out where she is, and whether anyone is helping her,” he ordered the faerie and it disappeared in a shower of iris petals. Will pulled on his socks and shoes.

“Oh, my goodness, this is so awful,” Amelia gasped, clutching a sheet in front of her mouth.

“I shouldn’t have stayed, I knew I should have gone home,” he muttered. “If she dies…my God, she can’t die, she can’t die.” He imagined Lord Iris’s wrath, feared for Sophia who must have been with her. A ‘green place in Mundanus’ was probably St James’s Park as that was the closest to home.

The faerie reappeared. “There are mundanes there, lots of them, filthy men all around her and it’s so noisy.”

Will remembered what he’d seen of the emergency services on his Grand Tour. “Are there lots of blue flashing lights?” When the faerie nodded he realised Cathy was probably getting exactly the kind of care she needed. “Is she still alive?”

“You wouldn’t be here if she was dead,” the faerie said. “You’d be in Exilium, begging for forgiveness. My lord is furious.”

“So am I!”

“And now those mundanes have her.” The faerie flitted about his head.

“Tell Lord Iris I’m doing everything in my power to make sure Cathy will be safe.”

“I’ll tell him you will be now, but if you hadn’t been distracted—”

“Just go!” he yelled, making it scowl and then disappear with a pop.

Amelia ran to the door and called for Cornelius. “What are you going to do?” she asked.

Now he knew Cathy was being helped and that, if Sophia was with her, she’d be cared for too, he could think clearly. “She’ll be taken to a hospital.

I need to contact the Agency.” As head of a household, he’d had a pack of information sent to him detailing other services the Agency provided outside of common knowledge. He was thankful he’d taken the time to read it. In return for a small fortune, they would extract Cathy from Mundanus, remove any mention of the incident in the relevant records and Charm any mundanes involved to forget she’d been there. It was complex and difficult, but worth it. “They’ll help me clear up the mess. When I know my family is safe I’ll find out who did this.”

“And then what?” She was pale, still clinging to the sheet as Cornelius arrived.

“Then I’ll destroy them.”

“The bar was just lying next to you?”

“Under me,” Sam said to the policewoman. His voice was so hoarse it sounded alien. “I landed on the railings. I think I broke them.”

She made a note and then looked him up and down. “You’re not the heaviest man, Mr Westonville. The assailant must have thrown you with some force.”

He pointed at the bruising on his neck. “He nearly choked me to death one-handed. He was strong.”

“So you picked up the bar…”

“Yeah, and I looked over and he stabbed the woman.” A wave of nausea made him suck in a breath. “There was a horrible sound, when it hit her chest I suppose, and I just threw the bar at him.”

“And you hit him square on.”

“Yeah.”

“From ten metres away, when you were injured and bleeding.”

He frowned. “Don’t you believe me?”

“I’m just making sure I have all the details, sir.”

“If I hadn’t hit him he would have stabbed her again.”

She just nodded. “And then what happened?”

“I called 999 and I passed out.”

“The doctor tells me you’re very lucky.”

Sam looked down at the two iron chunks beside him. The nurse had told him they’d pulled one out of his arm, one out of his side. Apparently they’d formed rudimentary plugs in his wounds. The nurse said they’d never seen anything like it and offered the plugs to him as morbid souvenirs. They were thicker than the railings had been, the policewoman had pointed out, and she wanted to know how they’d got that way. Sam had a working theory it was something to do with Lord Iron and the wedding ring. He couldn’t say anything about it though.

“I’ve got a cracked rib and a couple of small holes in me apparently. And bruising.”

He wondered how Cathy and the girl were. The police officer had been professionally vague, saying Cathy was in surgery and the girl was being cared for in A & E. He’d pretended he didn’t know who they were, saying he’d gone to the park to get some fresh air in the midst of a marital crisis and he was passing as the man attacked.

He needed to speak to Cathy as soon as she woke and warn her that one of the Fae were after her—one of the Thorn brothers, no less. But he’d have to wait until the police had finished taking notes and she was out of surgery.

“The woman who was attacked will be OK, won’t she?” he asked.

“I’m afraid I don’t know. It was a serious attack. She’s lucky you were there.” The police officer stood and put her hat back on. “Thanks for the

details. You'll need to make a formal statement when you're feeling better. We're doing all we can to catch him."

Sam just gave a weak smile, knowing there was no way in hell anyone would find Thorn. He lay back against the pillow, glad to be in a room alone thanks to the need for an interview with the police. The bandages were tight around his torso and arm and he still felt shaky but the nurse had told him that was normal.

He'd asked them to contact Leanne as his next of kin. He hoped she would at least come and make sure he was OK. She hadn't left a message and it was driving him mad that the one time she'd called him he hadn't been able to answer the phone. He felt worn out but every time he tried to relax he thought about the attack.

There was a brisk knock on the door and a man entered. He wasn't wearing a white coat nor any medical accoutrements, just a smart suit with a light jacket over it. Sam didn't recognise him.

He was carrying a clipboard and an air of importance like that of a hospital administrator or manager. "Mr Samuel Westonville?"

Something about the way he said it made the hairs on the back of Sam's neck prickle. "Yeah."

"I just need to clarify a few details about the case with you."

"Who are you?"

"DI Taylor."

"I just spoke to your constable."

"And she highlighted some details I wanted to check myself."

"Can I see some ID, please?"

The man smiled affably, plucked an ID wallet from his pocket and flipped it open. "I understand you interrupted the attack."

Sam nodded but the ID hadn’t calmed the sense of there being something dangerous about the man. He thought about how Thorn had disguised himself and wondered if this was him coming to kill off a key witness. Sam’s mouth went dry.

“Could you explain to me how the railings broke?”

“I landed on them. Look, I told the policewoman everything and I’m feeling rough. Could we talk about this tomorrow?”

“I understand. Could I just take a look at the bruising on your neck?”

“I was telling the truth. He picked me up and threw me.” Sam nervously reached up to his throat. Now he was more concerned they disbelieved him and were going to start seeing him as a suspect.

The man’s smile became false and froze rictus-like on his face when he saw the wedding ring. He shuddered and took a step back as he made a show of peering at the injury. “Yes, I can see the marks quite well from here. Well, thank you, Mr Westonville. As you said, I should let you rest.”

The man left quickly. Sam looked at the ring and twisted it nervously on his finger. As soon as the doctor gave him the all-clear he was going to get out of there and go somewhere safe.

24

Will paced the length of the small room in three strides, already hating the pale-green walls and faded pastel pictures. Cornelius was perched on one of the chairs, as if trying to minimise contact with the mundane furniture. He looked strange in the casual shirt and jeans he'd changed into for the trip into Mundanus.

"You don't have to stay," Will said.

"I don't think you should be alone at a time like this."

Will managed a smile and resumed the pacing.

"I'd forgotten how unpleasant Mundanus smells," Cornelius said.

"Hospitals are particularly bad," Will replied. All he wanted to do was find Sophia. The man from the Agency dressed as a doctor had shown them into the room and told them to wait whilst he got an update on Cathy's surgery. He'd mentioned in his preliminary report that a mundane man and child had been brought in with her, but hadn't said anything more about them. Will had been relieved to hear Sophia described as such, having been terrified that the Agency would somehow identify her. Now he just needed to know how badly hurt she was.

"I'm going to see if I can find a cup of tea," he said.

"I can go." Cornelius half rose out of the chair.

"No, I need to do something," Will said. "I won't be long."

He walked away from the room briskly, planning to be round the corner and out of sight as quickly as possible in case Cornelius decided to follow him. Whilst he was grateful for the gesture of support and an extra pair of

eyes in case any attempts were made to trick or dupe him, he didn't want Cornelius to know about Sophia.

Will headed back towards the accident and emergency department they'd walked through only five minutes before, knowing Sophia would be treated there. He hated the thought of her alone in such a noisy, frightening place, and had to get her back home without the Agency clean-up team knowing.

He approached the desk and a nurse looked up from her computer. "Good morning. I'm looking for my cousin, she's almost five years old, blonde hair, brown eyes, she was brought in earlier, she was involved in an incident at a park." He didn't want to say she was his sister, just in case the enquiry ended up on a record somewhere for the Agency to find. Paranoia was the best policy where a clean-up was involved.

"What's her name?"

"Sophia."

The woman sighed. "Sophia what?"

A cubicle curtain was drawn back sharply a few metres away, and Uncle Vincent was standing there, looking most grave. "Will, she's over here."

"May I?" he checked with the nurse and she waved him on.

Will hurried over. "Uncle Vincent? What are you doing here? How is she?"

He stood aside, revealing Sophia's sleeping face. There was a gash across her right cheek held together with tiny white plasters. She was lying under a blanket but he could see she was in a hospital gown and her arms were bandaged. He went to her side and brushed his fingertips over her hair, barely able to breathe.

"You'd better have a damn good explanation for how this happened," his uncle said.

“Whoever did it almost murdered my wife,” Will whispered.

“You were supposed to be looking after her.”

“I don’t need you to make me feel any worse. They were attacked at a park. Cathy was stabbed—she’s in surgery now.”

“Who did it?”

“I don’t know yet.”

“Will Catherine pull through?”

“I don’t know. How did you know Sophia was here?”

“Your mother asked me to keep an eye on her. I saw her in an ambulance through the scrying glass and I watched until I knew where she was. I’ve only been here ten minutes.”

“Do my parents know?”

“No. I don’t think they need to yet, do you?”

Will looked back down at Sophia. She looked so small in the huge bed. “No. How badly is she hurt?”

“She’s covered in puncture wounds.” His uncle’s voice wavered and he cleared his throat. “The policewoman said she was found in the undergrowth but they don’t understand why her wounds are so bad. The doctor said she’ll be scarred. They’ve given her something to make her rest. She was very distressed, understandably.”

Will gripped the edge of the bed, wanting the one who did it to be dragged in so he could personally rip his throat out. “Do they need to do anything more?”

“No. I just didn’t want to move her until I saw you. I knew you’d be here soon enough.”

Will took one of his calling cards from his wallet. “Get a taxi to the Hyde Park stables in Bathurst Mews, ask for Jones and give him this card. Tell him who you are and ask him to take you to my house. Remember, they

think Sophia is my cousin. I'll come home as soon as I have a full report from the Agency and know when we can extract Cathy from mundane care. Don't leave until I get home."

"Is it safe for her there?"

"Yes, damn it, of course it is. And go now, the Agency's clean-up team is here. I don't want you to be seen with her."

Vincent said nothing as Will kissed Sophia's forehead gently and returned to the waiting room.

"No tea?" Cornelius asked.

"The machine only took coins," Will said with a shrug. "I only have notes on me. Has the Agency man been back yet?"

"No."

Will sat down and rested his head in his hands, trying to drive the image of Sophia's injuries from his mind. The feeling of complete impotence made his skin itch, as if all the anger was crawling beneath it like insects. He wanted to punch someone and throw the chairs around the room and yell as loud as he could like some bestial man, but he forced himself to stay still. He would find out who did it, and kill them. The thought helped.

The door opened and the Agency man walked in, looking shaken. Will's chest felt like steel bands had been wrapped around it as he stood and looked at the man expectantly.

"There are some complications to this case I feel I should discuss with you in private, Mr Iris." The man took the stethoscope from around his neck and laid it on one of the chairs.

"Cornelius, would you excuse us?"

Cornelius gave the man a long look as he left the room.

"Let's sit down."

Will did as he suggested, noting the tension in the man's shoulders and the way he adjusted his position a couple of times once seated.

"How is my wife?"

"She's still in surgery. It's very serious, Mr Iris, she nearly died. Had the knife been removed by the attacker she would have bled to death before the ambulance could arrive. Ironically, leaving the weapon in her was the best thing that could have happened in the unfortunate circumstances."

Will ran his hands through his hair and looked up at the ceiling. "What are they doing to her?"

"I'll get access to the full details once she's out of the operating room, but from what I've gathered so far one of her lungs has collapsed and she's bleeding severely into her chest cavity. They've had to insert a tube—"

Will held up a hand. "How long will she be in surgery?"

"I can't say with accuracy. They'll have to leave the chest tube in for several days at least until the lung has healed. Mrs Iris was kicked and knocked out. She has a concussion as well as a bad bruise to her jaw and deep cuts on her arms. She must have been defending herself."

"Oh, God."

"Her hands are badly cut too, though no one understands why. There will be extensive scarring, especially to her chest, and it will take several weeks for her to recover fully if she makes it through the surgery without further complications."

"The ones you mentioned?"

"Ah, no, sir. I told you when you arrived that the initial police report was of a man and child found injured in the same attack."

Will held his breath, expecting him to say something about Sophia.

"We've looked into the man's statement and there's…something odd about what he did. I'll read you the preliminary report."

Will listened to a description of a man ending the attack by throwing an iron bar. At first, Will was simply glad he'd been there, but when he was told about the way the railings had broken, the iron plugs in the man's wounds, the accuracy of the difficult shot and no athletic background, his frown deepened.

"All of this, and the fact a very experienced colleague detected something…disconcerting about a ring he wears, leads us to suspect he's connected to the Elemental Court."

"The who?"

"We know very little about them, I'm afraid, but we know they have an arrangement with the Sorcerers. It seems a representative of Lord Iron defended your wife." He leaned closer. "Would you have any idea why?"

"No," Will said, disturbed by what he was hearing. "I've never even heard of a Lord Iron. Are they like our patrons?"

"I wouldn't like to speculate, sir. Information on them is remarkably difficult to come by."

"I'll see what I can find out. All of this will be kept confidential, won't it?"

"Of course, sir."

"What about the weapon? You said it wasn't removed. Does that mean we have a way to find the attacker?"

"The weapon was a stiletto, which is easy to conceal. It's currently held by the police as evidence but we'll recover it. From the initial report, there are no markings of note on it, but then I wouldn't expect there to be."

"Are there any leads?"

The man shook his head. "Not yet, sir. The crime scene is crawling with mundanes at the moment so it's very difficult for us to use our own methods to ascertain anything concrete. Should anything arise we'll inform you, of

course. Our primary function is to prevent a breach and avoid the wrath of the Sorcerers by having the mundanes poking their noses where they should not."

Will nodded, wondering if he could hire an investigator of some kind. Then he imagined Cathy in surgery, the blood, the people manhandling her like she was a piece of meat. "The doctors…they wear gloves, don't they?"

"Yes, sir."

"When can I take my wife home?"

"I would recommend removing her to the Nether once she's out of intensive care. Mundane medicine is really quite remarkable. There's no better way to ensure her survival with such serious injuries."

"How long will that be?"

"I'll know once she's out of surgery. We have someone posted to watch her twenty-four hours a day. Once she's well enough to be nursed at home we'll start the full clean-up."

"And you can provide a nurse?"

"Yes, sir, fully vetted, as all our staff are."

Will nodded. "Please brief my steward on what will be needed."

"There's another matter I feel I should bring to your attention." The man looked nervous. "Another complication."

Will straightened. Don't mention Sophia, he thought. Don't mention—

"Your wife was carrying a mobile phone and an iPad. Both are devices used by the—"

"I know what they are," Will interrupted. "I've recently returned from my Grand Tour."

The man coughed to disguise his embarrassment. "My apologies. It's registered to Catherine Parker, with an address in Manchester."

"Manchester? What in the Worlds—?"

“Indeed, sir. We’re looking into the possibility that your wife borrowed it. But my suspicion, if I may be so bold, is that your wife has a mundane alias based in the dark city. The police will look at the logged calls as part of the investigation.”

“Well, you have to lock that all down,” Will said, feeling sweat break out on his palms. “Immediately.”

“That will be very difficult—”

“That’s what you do, isn’t it? That’s what I’m paying you for?”

The man nodded.

“I want details of all the phone contacts, the address, everything, and I want that separate from any notes you keep on this case,” Will said, lowering his voice. “I don’t want any of it to be seen by your boss. I don’t want anyone except you and me to know.”

“That’s rather—”

“I’ll pay you handsomely for the inconvenience,” Will added.

The man looked him in the eye and understood the bribe. “I see, sir. I’ll consider it my personal priority and will exercise the utmost discretion.”

So Horatio’s accusations had been true. Cathy had been in Mundanus and established enough to have another identity. Why Manchester of all places? The thought of her having so much hidden from him was a shock, but it explained the way she talked and the way she’d dealt with that problem with the furniture. No wonder she’d been so keen to take Sophia into Mundanus; she was exploiting an opportunity to use the internet. But why?

Then he realised the man who saved her from the attacker was probably her lover, the one Horatio had sneered at him about. She’d probably been at the park to meet that man and Sophia had provided the perfect excuse to linger there with him.

Will twitched at the thought of it. He wanted to throttle the man, even though he'd saved his wife. He needed to find him and tell him to stay away from Cathy. Will clasped his clammy hands together and tried to find some calm in the midst of the primal rage. He had to think, not react like a caveman. The Fidelity Charm would have made it impossible for Cathy to be unfaithful to him, but it wouldn't have stopped her being in love with this man. It must have been the reason behind her reluctance to consummate the marriage; she was trying to stay faithful to a man she fell in love with in Mundanus.

The Agency man stood with a finger pressed against his ear and for the first time Will noticed a small earpiece. "My colleague has told me an Arbiter is coming in. I have to leave. I recommend you do the same."

"I haven't done anything wrong," Will said.

"I'll let you know when you can see your wife," the man said as he headed to the door. "And, as far as you can, don't worry. We'll take care of everything regarding the mundanes."

Will was left with his fears. Cathy was too stubborn to just slip away, surely. He didn't want her to die. It wasn't just the shame of not protecting his wife adequately, it wasn't the guilt or the fear of reprisals from the Fae or her family. He wanted Cathy to survive and he wanted to take care of her and find a way to have a happy marriage. Will was certain they could have one, if he just had another chance. He had to give her a reason to leave this secret life of hers in Mundanus behind.

Max sat in silence a couple of metres away from his captive, knowing it would make the Fae more nervous. He took the time to review the breakthrough the puppet had given them. Two hours after Catherine had

given him the name of the Wisteria puppet, he'd told him the former head of the Alba-Rosa line was hiding in a small terraced house in South London, thankfully in the territory of the Sorcerer of Kent, who didn't have rogue Arbiters hunting him. Four hours later the truth mask had done its job and Max had confirmation that every ward in North London under the jurisdiction of the Sorcerer of Essex was corrupt. The sobbing man had spoken of the Rosas being given carte blanche by their Patroon to do what they wished in London north of the river. His own son had arranged the kidnapping of five blonde men and women on the order of Lady Rose herself, using a modelling agency on Judd Street as a front, just as Max had suspected.

The real breakthrough came when Max had pretended the man hadn't told him enough and that he'd be handed over to the Agency. That was when Alba-Rosa, once a proud and powerful man, fell to his knees and begged to be spared in return for a means to contact Thorn himself. And it had worked. Max tricked him into entering Mundanus and took him into custody. He'd made more progress in the last twelve hours than he'd made since being shot at the clock tower.

Every time Max drew a breath, Thorn twitched. He was dressed in a grey coat with half-cape, an elaborately embroidered waistcoat and breeches. He had a sack over his head and was bound with bands of copper to an iron chair, at the centre of several concentric circles of wards chalked onto the floor of Ekstrand's ballroom. Max cleared his throat and Thorn whimpered. He was ripe.

"There are a few specks of blood on the right-hand sleeve of your coat, Mr Thorn," he said. "Would you like to explain how they got there?"

"I don't have to answer to you, dog. Under whose authority do you keep me here?"

“You were in Mundanus, Mr Thorn. You know that’s not allowed.”

“I only came through because I was called by one of ours. I wasn’t doing anything to an innocent.”

“The blood. Who does it belong to?”

The Fae sat in silence. Max gave it a minute, then unzipped the small leather case that had been resting on the table beside him. He removed the copper implements one by one, dropping them from an inch above the metal tray so they landed with a loud clink.

“I have several questions,” Max said. “And I have several tools here that I can use to get the answers, if you continue to be uncooperative.” He stood, picked up the first implement and limped over, using the walking stick to make his approach obvious. “I have a sickel probe here, made of copper. The mundanes use them to look for tooth decay, but I’ve found they’re perfect for sliding under fingernails.”

“You think torture will get what you want?”

“Yes, I do.”

“There will be consequences if you harm me,” Thorn said.

“Really? Your family has fallen from grace and you’re an embarrassment to the royal family. The last I heard you were being punished in Exilium, which makes me wonder if you’re not only persona non grata, but also on the run from the Prince’s wrath.”

“The Prince!” Thorn laughed. “You know nothing, you empty shell, nothing.”

“I’m about to change that,” Max said. “Are you sure you don’t want to tell me where that blood came from?” When Thorn remained silent, he lined himself up with the back of the chair and positioned the probe above one of the Fae’s nails. “Last chance.”

“You wouldn’t dare.”

Max gripped the nail, shaped more like a talon, on the forefinger of the Fae's right hand and thrust the sharp end of the probe into the flesh beneath. Thorn screeched and Max counted to five, occasionally tweaking the angle of the pick. Made feeble by the copper bonds, Thorn couldn't break free.

Max pulled the probe out. "I have a pair of copper pliers too, perfect for extracting nails. Then the flesh underneath is so much easier to get to."

Thorn whimpered but said nothing so Max went back to the tray and rummaged noisily. He took his time going back, letting the Fae listen to the steady *thunk* of the walking stick on the floor.

"The blood came from Poppy's favourite," Thorn said as Max lined himself up behind the chair again.

"Catherine Rhoeas-Papaver?"

"Catherine Reticulata-Iris now." Thorn clenched his fists in a vain attempt to protect himself. "The cold one managed to steal her and plant her in his family."

"How did her blood get on your coat?"

Thorn sighed heavily and his head fell forward. "It…splashed. I would have pierced her heart but one of the blood metals interfered. Go and sit down, empty one, and I'll tell you. Damn the Prince, damn all of them. I see no reason to endure pain for them. Nothing will help my brethren now."

Max returned to his chair and tossed the pliers back onto the tray. "I'm listening."

"I didn't escape. The Prince released me to do his bidding once more. He holds my brother and sister. I had to do it."

"The Prince told you to kill Catherine Iris?"

"The Prince told me to stop the Irises taking the Londinium throne. Whatever it took. I found one of ours, hidden like a bulb waiting for the

spring. He knew of the Iris boy and his vain hopes. The one we hate. The one who ruined everything for us!”

William Iris, Max thought. “Go on,” he said.

“I wanted to drown his heart in grief and confusion,” Thorn said. “I wanted to kill the one given to him and make his pairing imperfect. It would humiliate him in the eyes of the cold one and unleash Poppy’s wrath upon him. We wanted him to think it was another in the Londinium Court, to give the Iris boy another to blame in case it was witnessed. It would have been perfect, had it not been for the blood metal.”

Max knew he meant iron; the Fae couldn’t even bring themselves to say the word. “You said you had to do the Prince’s bidding ‘once more’—when was the last time?”

“When my brother and I stole the Lavender from Aquae Sulis.”

Max adjusted the way he sat, to try and ease the ache in his leg. “The Prince asked you to do that?”

“Yes. He was behind all of it. He told my sister to do all she could to undermine the cold one’s grip on the city. He told us we would be protected should anything go wrong. Ha! How bitter royal lies are!”

Max reined in his own speculation. Better to take the information to the Sorcerer and discuss it with him. “Your people in Londinium have no fear of Arbiters. They’ve been bolder in Mundanus of late.”

“The Prince had nothing to do with that. My sister made a deal with a Sorcerer—I don’t know the details. In return, the Arbiters ignored our own.”

“It seems your sister is willing to go to extraordinary lengths to protect the information you’re so happy to give.”

“What extraordinary lengths?”

“Killing Arbiters.”

Thorn sat up straighter. “We’ve done no such thing.”

“You would say that, being strapped to a chair in front of one.”

“Which Arbiters? We haven’t killed anyone, not even the one we planned to this morning.”

Max listened carefully, alert to any tightness in the Fae’s voice, but it sounded like Thorn was actually telling the truth. He had to be sure though. He couldn’t risk passing anything inaccurate onto Ekstrand. “Tell me more about this deal your sister made,” Max said, reaching for the copper pliers.

25

Will didn’t have a chance to speak to Cornelius before a man in scruffy mundane jeans and sweatshirt came into the waiting room. Will would have thought him an average man off the street, were it not for the fact that his face wore the chilling, expressionless stare of an Arbiter. His eyes were slightly bulbous, his mouth wide with thin lips, both giving him an unpleasant frog-like appearance.

Will and Cornelius stood. The Arbiter looked at them both and then focused on Will. “You’re William Reticulata-Iris.”

“I am.”

The Arbiter’s eyes flicked to Cornelius. “I understand you’re a White now.”

Cornelius just nodded and the Arbiter looked back at Will. “Your wife was just stabbed in St James’s Park. I understand she survived the attack.”

“Yes.”

“You’ve only been in the city for less than a month and have already caused one of the most serious breaches in the last one hundred years. A man and child were involved. Innocents. Not to mention the ones cleaning your mess up.”

“It’s not a breach, it’s being handled by my people.” Will didn’t need the Arbiter to make him feel any worse. “Once my wife is out of danger she’ll be removed from Mundanus.”

The Arbiter sat down on one of the plastic chairs. “I know you’re doing everything right, otherwise I wouldn’t be being so polite. I went to the

crime scene and I know who's behind the attack."

Will's fists clenched. "Who was it?"

"So you want to deal with this?"

"Yes."

"Suits me—I'd rather not have the paperwork. I only want your guarantee that you deal with this in the Nether, and involve no innocents, nor—"

"Just tell me who tried to kill my wife!" Will shouted.

The Arbiter stared at him for a moment. "Someone from the Tulipa line. Massive Charm use, most likely a powerful glamour, seeing as there were other mundanes in the area. I take it you know the Tulipas? They live in Hampton Court, you can't miss it."

Will shook his head. "You must be mistaken."

The Arbiter's stare was difficult to stomach. "I don't make mistakes about things like this. I'd be on your guard until you deal with them. And, for what it's worth, I don't care how you deal with it as long as it stays out of Mundanus. London is dangerous enough without your kind trying to kill each other."

"That's enough, Faulkner," Cornelius said and herded the man towards the door.

"I can't believe it," Will said when the Arbiter had gone. "Not Bartholomew. He'd never hurt Cathy."

"Will—" Cornelius' voice was firm "—Arbiters don't lie."

"But it must be a mistake, a—"

"Think about it. You have a wealthy, powerful family, so does your wife. You told Bartholomew you were going to stand against him and I warned you he would act."

"But why Cathy? Why not attack me?"

“To make you weak. To pull you out of the running. To make you so griefstricken that you forget your ambition. Or to make you an unattractive proposition for the Court—would a recently widowed man be a stable Duke? Any and all of those things. But it’s also a statement, Will, do you see? They’re showing you they don’t care about being decent or playing by the rules. They’d rather destroy you than see you on the throne.”

“But Bartholomew isn’t the type of man to attack a woman with a dagger. It’s too crude.”

“He may not have wielded it himself, but he gave the order. The Arbiters don’t get this kind of thing wrong.”

“But can we trust an Arbiter over our own instincts?” The only other Arbiter Will had ever seen was the one in Aquae Sulis and he’d just watched him limp through into Exilium. Had they ever fed misinformation to those in Society for their own ends?

“Why would he lie, even if he were capable of it?” Cornelius replied. “He just wants us to stay away from the innocents.”

Will held his head in his hands. “I can’t rush into a reprisal based on what an Arbiter says. I have to wait for the report from the Agency. I need more evidence before I start a war.”

Sam woke and looked around the hospital room in disorientation. A knock at the door sounded too loud and he wondered if previous knocks had woken him. “Come in.” He winced at his bruised throat.

The policewoman entered who’d interviewed him before. It wasn’t as if she’d been cheerful then, but there was a new depth to her grave expression. “Mr Westonville, I’m sorry to wake you, but I have something to tell you.”

He sat up. “Oh, God, did she die?”

“The woman in the park? No, she’s in intensive care now. The surgery went well, apparently.” She came in and sat beside the bed. “Mr Westonville, I’m very sorry to inform you that your wife died this afternoon.”

“What?” A faint ringing began in his ears.

“She suffered a brain aneurysm whilst waiting for a train in Paddington station. She was pronounced dead on arrival at A & E. I’m so sorry.”

“What? When?”

“This afternoon. Whilst you were here.”

It felt like the bruising on his throat was getting worse. He could barely swallow. “What?” he said, then again and again, as if his thoughts were stuck on a loop.

“Mr Westonville, as your wife’s next of kin, you need to confirm her identity.”

“When?”

“I can take you now.”

“Where?”

“The morgue.”

He didn’t remember walking down the corridors with her, nor the lift. He was only barely aware of a couple of heavy double doors, someone behind a desk who gave him something to sign, being led into a room, a massive drawer in the wall being opened…

Leanne looked like she was asleep.

She was asleep, in the hotel on their honeymoon, a two-star pit in Bournemouth, the sound of mad seagulls coming in through the window. He watched her wake and, after smiling at him, she looked towards the window.

“Do you think the locals are slaughtering them?” he’d asked.

“Sam, we’re on our honeymoon.” She tickled his ribs. “The gulls are shagging, not being slaughtered.” Then they were lying naked on top of the sheets. It was back when the summer came in August and it was too hot to make love under them.

“If I ever make a noise like that when we’re shagging,” he’d said, running a hand over her stomach, “divorce me.”

Sam didn’t remember leaving the morgue or reaching the steps leading down from the hospital entrance. He didn’t realise he was sitting until he saw Max looking down at him.

“Are you hurt?” Max asked.

“My wife.”

“Has something—”

“Neugent. Fucking Neugent.”

“He murdered her?”

“She tried to call me but I was hurt, in the park. Thorn tried to kill Cathy.”

“I know. I brought him in for questioning. Are you badly hurt?”

He shook his head.

“Mr Ekstrand wants to see you,” Max said. “Will you come with me?”

Then Sam was sitting on the sofa in front of the fire, the smell of woodsmoke and the clatter of Axon carrying in tea and cake seeming so familiar and so alien at the same time. Petra came and sat next to him, taking his hand, asking if he wanted tea, and all he wanted to say was “I want my wife” but he couldn’t get the words through his thick throat. Then he wept.

Afterwards his head felt clearer and he accepted a cup of tea as Max and the gargoyle came in and sat opposite. Sam told them what had happened at the park, everything about the railings, about Thorn and then about the

policewoman collecting him to identify Leanne. The teacup rattled on the saucer as he spoke. There was silence after he finished.

“I’m so sorry, Sam,” Petra finally said. “That’s awful.”

“Yeah,” the gargoyle agreed. “How’s Cathy?”

“I dunno.” Sam shrugged and then winced as the movement tugged at his injuries. “Where’s Ekstrand?”

“With the apprentices. I’ve told him you’re here,” Max said.

“Would you like me to ask him if you can stay here for a while?” Petra asked. “There’s a room for you if you want. I can understand you not wanting to go home at the moment.”

“There’s no way I’m staying here again.”

“Ah, our guest has returned.” Ekstrand’s cheeriness crashed into the sombre sitting room. “Where have you been?”

“Mr Ekstrand.” Sam stood up. “I need your help.”

“What with?” Ekstrand asked, beckoning the apprentices in.

Eagerboy smiled but Sam didn’t have an ounce of friendliness left in him. “My wife has been killed by a total bastard and I need you to help me stop him from fucking anyone else’s lives up.”

Ekstrand looked at Max. “It’s possible Neugent—or something connected to him—had some involvement in his wife’s death,” Max said. “It’s not guaranteed.”

“He did,” Sam said. “She was losing weight, she wasn’t herself, and it was Neugent’s fault.” He pointed at Max. “You were the one who told me about that pattern in the first place. You know it’s true.”

“Who is this Neugent?” Ekstrand asked. “Is he a puppet?”

“No, he works for CoFerrum Inc,” Sam said. “He’s got something to do with Lord Iron.”

“Well, so do you.” Ekstrand pointed at the wedding ring. “Were you involved?”

“Sam.” Petra’s hand brushed his arm. “She died of natural causes.”

“There was nothing natural about it, she wasn’t even thirty!”

“But an aneurysm can happen to anyone at any time, and another person can’t cause it,” she replied. “It’s just something awful that happened to your wife. You can’t say with absolute certainty that Neugent had anything to do with it and the likelihood is he didn’t.”

“Bullshit. Max warned me about him, he does something to people and it makes them die young. He’ll do it again, I know he will.” He looked back at Ekstrand. “Look, aren’t you and the Arbiters supposed to protect innocents?”

“From the Fae and their puppets, yes,” Ekstrand replied.

“And the likes of Lord Iron and his people?”

“There’s never been any need. The Elemental Court are completely different from the Fae—they don’t interfere with people or kidnap them.”

“But my wife was an innocent who got sucked into some job that ended up with her living in an apartment designed to be an iron cage.”

“The apartment was designed to protect against Fae,” Max said. “It had a cage-like structure, but there was no sense of imprisonment there.”

“Well, that sounds rather helpful and sensible,” Ekstrand said.

“You don’t get it, do you?” Sam yelled. “My wife is dead! I tried to warn her, I did everything I could, but she died, and I’m telling you this will happen again to another couple. Help me do something about that! It’s directly connected to Lord Iron, who’s presumably in this Elemental Court, and you’re saying there’s no need to police them like the Fae?”

Ekstrand looked at Max. “Do you think there’s grounds for concern?”

Sam stared at the Arbiter, willing Max to support him.

“I do, sir,” Max replied.

“I disagree,” Petra said. “I think it was an awful coincidence.”

Ekstrand rubbed his chin and then turned to his students. “What you see here is a rather complex dilemma.”

“Don’t you dare make a fucking lesson out of this!” Sam marched over. “This is none of their business. The only lesson to be learnt is that Neugent needs to be stopped.”

Ekstrand’s eyes were shadowed by his brow. “There’s a lesson in everything. Even in watching what happens when a Sorcerer is insulted. Would you like me to make this more educational?”

“Mr Ekstrand—” Petra practically threw herself between them “—Sam is upset, please forgive him for being so emotional.”

Ekstrand pursed his lips, peering at Sam over her shoulder. “I can’t just leap to conclusions about people who may or may not be connected to Lord Iron. There are formal channels of communication with the Elemental Court which must be observed.”

“There are important reasons why things are done this way, Sam,” Petra said, now facing him with Ekstrand behind her. “I know it must be frustrating but—”

“That doesn’t even come close. I’ve had it with you people. You’ve never given a shit about how you’ve screwed my life up, there’s no way you’re going to help me now. Fuck you, fuck your sorcery bullshit and fuck your ways of doing things. I’m off.”

Sam pushed his way past Petra, who was begging Ekstrand to forgive him in his griefstricken state. Axon was near the front door looking at him expectantly. “I want to go home,” Sam said. There was a pause as Axon listened for any contrary instruction from Ekstrand. When none came he

nodded to Sam. “Take care, sir,” he said, opened the door and led him down the path to open the gates onto Mundanus.

Sam stepped out, looked up at the stars and the moon and felt hollow inside. The wounds hurt and there was nothing to listen to but the iron plugs clanking in his pockets as he began the walk home.

All Cathy saw at first was light. Then a shape by her side coalesced into Will.

“My love.” Will kissed her cheek. “How are you feeling?”

“Tired.” She looked down at her bandaged arms and hands. There were tubes and beeps and a distinct sense of being unwell. “I dreamed you were here.”

He smiled and smoothed her hair away from her forehead. “I came to you in the recovery room after the surgery but you were still waking up. The nurse said you might think you’d dreamed me.”

There was another shape outside the curtain and she could hear other beeps and people talking. “Where am I?”

“You’re in a hospital in London, in the intensive care unit. Do you remember what happened?”

She looked at the shape through the curtain. “Who’s that?”

“One of my people. I’m so sorry I wasn’t careful enough.” He kissed her cheek, her forehead, but she barely registered it. “I won’t let anyone hurt you again, I promise.”

“Where’s Sophia?”

“She’s safe at home.”

“The thorns, they were wrapped around her, she was hurt.”

“They’ve bandaged her up, and my uncle is with her.” Will paused. “Thorns?”

Cathy tried to nod but wasn’t certain if she was successful. “I told her to run, she was grabbed by…these creepers…growing out of the bushes covered in thorns. She was screaming. I tried to pull them off her. They were trying to wrap around her neck.” She looked back down at her hands, now understanding why they were bandaged.

“Then what happened?”

“The man had a dagger. He was going to hurt Sophia, so I tried to stop him.” She felt exhausted just talking about it.

“He was trying to hurt Sophia?”

“Yes, I don’t know why.”

“Not you?”

“Why would he want to hurt me? Why would he want to hurt her though? I don’t know, it doesn’t make any sense. Oh, God, Will it was awful. I don’t remember how I got here. He didn’t get Sophia?”

Will shook his head. “The man who attacked you, Cathy, did you recognise him?”

“No.”

“What did he look like?”

“I don’t remember his face…I was looking at the knife.” She felt tears welling. “He stabbed me?”

“Yes. Do you remember anything about him?”

“He was Fae-touched, he was wearing a grey coat with half-cape and a sparkly waistcoat. I saw it when he drew the dagger. Brown hair, in a ponytail.”

“Did he look like one of the Tulipa line?”

Cathy closed her eyes. All she wanted to do was sleep.

“Cathy? I’m sorry, but I need to know as much as possible. Did he look like Bartholomew?”

“What? No, nothing like him or his family. I’m tired.”

“You’re certain?”

“It was a Rosa, Will. The thorns…” He said something else but it was far away. “That’s a Rose Charm.” There was a brush against her forehead and then sinking into velvety darkness.

26

Will sat hunched over his desk, the fire crackling in the grate as he examined what he knew. The Arbiter said there was Tulipa magic at the crime scene—how he knew that, Will hadn't the faintest idea, but there was no reason the Arbiter would lie. The thorns Cathy reported explained Sophia's injuries and those to her own hands. By the time the police arrived the Charm controlling the thorns would have dissipated, leaving a badly hurt child and no evidence.

Whilst it was some relief to know how Sophia had been scarred, it also confused him. Cathy was convinced the attacker was a Rosa and the thorn angle was damning. But it sounded like a powerful Charm, and who could wield Rose magic now the patron was broken and the Rosas rounded up by the Agency? And if there had been such powerful Rose magic there, why hadn't the Arbiter mentioned it?

His uncle was still spending every minute of the day with Sophia, for which he was grateful; he only wanted close family around her. Every time he checked on her she asked when Cathy was coming home.

Will was still haunted by the thought that the man who threw the railing was a lover meeting Cathy in the park for a stolen hour. There was a chance he could have been passing by and intervened when he saw a woman and child being attacked, but when Will considered the secret mobile phone and computer, it was clear Cathy had been up to something in her private time. Whatever it was would end now. She was his wife and his alone, regardless of what happened before they married.

A rattling in the door made him look up. By the time he'd reached it the gilded letterbox had appeared and a note was posted through. When he saw the seal he knew it was from Amelia.

It was a Rosa, Will… Cathy's words haunted him as he went to the fireplace and opened the envelope. The note was brief and the handwriting suggested it was penned in a hurry.

Will, please come to me, something is wrong with Cornelius and I'm frightened.

Please hurry, darling.

Amelia.

Will crushed it in his hand, disturbed by the doubts that surfaced. Before seeing Cathy earlier that evening he would have been summoning a carriage without a second thought; now he wasn't certain whether he should go at all. But he couldn't just ignore the note.

He pulled the cord beside the fireplace. "Morgan, I need the carriage, urgently, with two armed footmen. And bring my sword cane with my cape."

"Yes, sir." Morgan bowed and left.

In the carriage Will prepared himself for the worst, fearing that Amelia was luring him into a trap. He chided himself for such paranoia. Then he remembered that if he'd been more cautious, Cathy and Sophia would never have been attacked. He was never going to let Cathy leave the house alone again. He'd have to find her a bodyguard for when he couldn't be with her, but could he trust the Agency enough to provide one? He shook his head. It was getting to him.

The carriage drew up; the door was opened and the step lowered. Will climbed out and looked at the footmen. They had both been trained in the

latest techniques from Mundanus, with modern pistols unclipped and ready to be drawn at their hip, the holsters incongruous with their formal eighteenth-century footmen's attire. "Come with me," he said to them. "And be ready for foul play."

Will rapped on the door with the knocker and the butler answered as usual. Amelia was in the hallway. At the sight of him she rushed forward and threw her arms around him.

"I'm so glad you're here!"

He could see she'd been crying. He returned the embrace, remembering how much he cared for her and how much he wanted her to be safe and happy. "What's wrong?"

She glanced at the footmen and pulled him away a couple of paces. "Cornelius came back a few hours ago," she said, her voice lowered. "He was very upset. He said Catherine had almost died and an Arbiter said the Tulipas were involved. But he seemed too upset. I knew he was holding something back."

"Let's talk in here," Will said, pulling her towards the drawing room. "Guard the door," he said to his men and then closed it.

"He was very tense…as if he were preoccupied. I asked him what was wrong but he wouldn't tell me. He told me to go to my room and stay there."

Will felt nauseous. Surely Cornelius couldn't be involved? "Then what happened?"

"A couple of hours went by so I asked the maid what he was doing and she said he was writing letters and throwing them on the fire. I told her to tell me if he did anything else, and later she came to me saying he'd sent out the footman with a note. Cornelius didn't come up to take tea with me as he usually does. I heard the door about an hour ago and the maid told me

a man had arrived and asked for Cornelius. He was taken to his study straightaway. I asked her who it was and she said he didn't have a calling card but Cornelius was expecting him."

She paused, biting her lip. "Go on," Will said.

"With everything that's happened, and the way he was acting, I was worried so I came downstairs. I thought I'd knock on his door and pretend I didn't know he had a guest, so I could see who it was. But when I came down I could hear Cornelius shouting. He never shouts. I heard the other man too, he said something about Tulipa, then there was a…I don't know… a scuffle and then a thud and it went quiet."

Will could feel her shivering beneath his hands. "Then what happened?"

"I knocked on the door and Cornelius told me to go away. Just like that, 'Go away', very harshly. Then I heard him weeping. I haven't been able to get into the room, it's locked from the inside. The butler said he was told not to disturb them. Cornelius won't come out." She broke down. "I didn't know what to do so I wrote to you. Do you think I'm being silly?"

"No."

"You're angry with me."

"No, I'm not. You did the right thing. Stay in here and don't worry. I'll make sure he's all right."

The thought of Cathy in hospital flashed through his mind as he kissed Amelia. He went out, checked she was remaining behind and then shut the door. "Come with me," he said to his men and headed for Cornelius's study.

"Cornelius?" he called as he knocked. "Is everything all right?" There was a long pause. Will tried the handle but the door was locked. He knocked again. "Cornelius?"

He pressed his ear to the door but couldn't hear anything. He beckoned to the butler, who'd been lingering in the hallway since he'd arrived. "Do

you have a spare key?”

“Yes, sir, I’ll get it for you.”

Two minutes later Will was turning the key in the lock, his other hand on the sword cane. He opened the door slowly. “Cornelius? It’s Will, I’m coming inside.”

He peered around the door. The body was the first thing he saw, sprawled on the rug in front of the fire. It was a man, dressed in a grey coat with half-cape, just as Cathy had described.

It took him a moment to locate Cornelius. He was sitting in a corner wedged between two bookcases with knees drawn up, staring at the body. A glass paperweight was lying on the floor between his feet, smeared with blood. He was as white as a fine china cup and there were spots of blood on his cheek.

“Wait outside,” Will told his footmen, then went in and closed the door behind him. “Cornelius?”

“I killed him,” Cornelius whispered.

Will stepped carefully over the body and moved round to look at his face, which had been obscured by the desk. He was lying on his back, his eyes open. His hair was long and brown, tied back in a ponytail, and Will could see a heavily embroidered waistcoat beneath the partially unbuttoned coat. As he got closer, he could see the blood pooled on the rug and the depression in the man’s skull, presumably made by the leaded glass ball.

“Who is he?”

“My cousin,” Cornelius finally answered.

“A Rosa?”

“Yes.”

“What happened?” Will stooped to close the man’s eyelids. He’d never seen a dead body before nor touched one.

“He was the one who stabbed Catherine.”

“How do you know that?”

“He told me.”

Will pulled the one chair in the room closer to Cornelius and sat down. “Did someone take him in to protect him from the Agency?”

“No. He was in hiding.”

“I think you need to start at the beginning. Let me get you a drink.”

Will poured two brandies from the decanter on the other side of the room and handed one to Cornelius, who took it with a shaking hand.

“When I came back from Mundanus I started to think about the Tulipas, how you said they’d never be so crass.” Cornelius took a long drink and it seemed to steady him. “So I decided to pull in a favour and make some enquiries.”

“I didn’t realise there was a place where one could contact the local assassin.”

Cornelius didn’t react to the comment. “There are certain unsavoury individuals in Londinium who always seem to know what’s going on. One thing led to another and it all pointed to my cousin. He was desperate enough to agree to a meeting. He was afraid he was going to be killed.” Cornelius laughed bitterly. “But not by his own cousin.”

“What did he tell you?”

“That Tulipa promised to hide him from the Agency indefinitely in return for Catherine’s death.”

Will put his glass on the desk. Now he was starting to shake. “Bartholomew?”

“Yes.”

“Are you certain he was telling the truth?”

“Yes. I…I lost control of myself. I could see you throwing Amelia and me out to the dogs because of that selfish bastard. And there was a child there, he almost murdered a woman and child, Will. One of my blood. I didn’t realise I’d hit him until he fell.” The glass slipped from his hand and he hid his face.

“I don’t blame you,” Will said. All of his rage was aimed at the Tulipas. “You and Amelia are Whites now, not Rosas. And if you were still a Rosa you would have hidden this from me, hidden him and not cared about what he’d done. It all makes sense now. Cathy thought he was a Rosa. Bartholomew must have given him some sort of Charm, that’s what the Arbiter picked up on. But she said creepers covered with thorns were holding the child…that’s the only thing I don’t understand. How could a Rose Charm still be—”

“The dagger once belonged to one of the Thorn brothers,” Cornelius replied. “It still held some power. He told me.”

Will felt all the uncertainty drop away, leaving only a bright core of pure anger and the desire for revenge. “You were right about Bartholomew,” he whispered. “It was all an act and I fell for it. Even though he didn’t do it with his own hands, he planned it all and he paid another man to murder my wife.” Will knocked the rest of the brandy down his throat. “I have to act. It’s just a matter of time before my Patroon or my patron find out about this and demand to know what I’m doing about it.”

“This isn’t just about them trying to murder Catherine,” Cornelius said. “This is about the throne of Londinium. Strike back and send a clear signal to the Londinium Court that you are a strong, decisive man.”

Will nodded slowly, remembering the sight of his sister, thinking of Cathy lying in hospital, needing to do something to channel the rage. “If

I’m to go against the Tulipas directly I’m going to do it properly. I have to see my patron.”

The house smelled stale when Sam got home. He didn’t bother to turn the light on; the creeping twilight gave him enough to see by and matched his mood. It had taken almost an hour to walk home and whilst it had made his wounds complain he needed the exhaustion.

Leanne was dead.

He chucked the keys into the bowl in the hallway and looked at the picture of the two of them in the field, lit by an amber shard from the streetlight outside. He wished he could remember it being taken, wished it gave him something other than a sense of emptiness. He knew the album from their wedding day was on the bookshelf in the spare room upstairs, and that he wouldn’t be able to look at it for a long time. A part of him wanted to study the pictures and invite in pure grief in the hope that eventually the rock in his chest would be expelled, but more of him just wanted to switch off.

He went into the living room and saw nothing but the pictures she’d chosen, the furniture she’d picked out, the plants she’d bought. The only thing he’d really contributed was the TV and DVD player. He decided to put the house on the market the next day and move somewhere a long way away that was completely his.

Car doors slammed outside and he went to the window. The street was filled with parked cars now all the commuters were home. He saw neighbours from either side of the house and a couple of people he didn’t recognise all pull out and drive off at the same time, leaving the road outside his house and his neighbour’s completely free of parked cars.

Normally he wouldn’t have given it a second thought, but now he knew about the Fae-touched and Sorcerers he felt distinctly unsettled. He wondered if Cathy’s husband had found out about him or if Ekstrand was planning to do something that required easy access to his house. Then he realised neither party would want to do anything in the real world; they’d be sneaking through the Nether. He shivered and looked behind him at the empty room.

The sound of a car outside brought his attention back to the road. A stretch limousine was crawling down the narrow street and pulled into the space that had just been made. Sam went to the side of the window so he’d be out of sight from the road, fearing that Neugent would step out any moment. Once it was parked, a man got out of the front passenger seat dressed in a dark suit. He looked like a broad-shouldered security man or FBI mook from a silly American thriller. He even had an earpiece and a flesh-coloured curly wire reaching down beneath the collar of his white shirt.

The man looked the street up and down, spoke into a concealed mouthpiece and then moved to open the rear passenger door. Another burly guard got out, followed by another. Sam’s breath sped up as the adrenalin kicked in. He considered leaving by the back door, not wanting to find out who was inside, even if it was Neugent. Nobody brought blokes that big with them for a tea party. But he couldn’t tear his eyes away from the spectacle in his quiet suburban street.

The third man to get out was the one they were there to protect; his neck wasn’t as wide as his head and he was at least a foot shorter than the guards. His suit was well-cut and fitted perfectly. He buttoned his jacket when he got out. He had the air of confidence that the super-wealthy exude

effortlessly and appeared to be of mixed-race descent, his hair black and cropped short. He was looking at Sam's house.

He gave a nod to one of the men, who opened the garden gate and came up the path. Panicking, Sam dashed into the hallway and went into the kitchen only to see another suited guard posted at the end of the garden, so tall his head was visible despite the six-foot-high gate.

The doorbell rang. Sam jumped and then winced as the movement aggravated the wounds. He could pretend to be out; the lights were off, after all. But then he realised they'd arrived only minutes after he'd got home. They'd probably followed him or could already have been watching the house.

The doorbell rang again, followed by a loud knock. There was nowhere to run even if he had been fit enough to do so. If the events of recent weeks had taught him anything it was that when powerful people made him their business, there wasn't much to be done about it.

Sam opened the door and looked up at the guard.

"Mr Samuel Westonville?" the man asked in a predictably deep voice.

"Yeah." He tried not to sound nervous.

The man stepped aside and his boss walked up the path to the doorstep. "May I come in, Mr Westonville? I have something to discuss with you."

"Who are you?"

"If I may?" He wanted to come in before anything else was said. Sam looked at the two mooks standing behind him and gestured for them all to come inside, leaving them to close the door.

Sam went into the living room and switched on the light. The guards came in before the boss, one sweeping the room with a trained eye, the other pulling down the blind and closing the curtains. "Clear, sir," the curtain-closer said and the man entered.

Sam stood in front of the TV, trying to look as calm and capable as he could with an arm in a sling. After glancing around the room, the boss came in further but didn't sit down.

"So who are you?"

"I imagine you're already familiar with one of my names. I'm Lord Iron."

Sam's tongue felt like a piece of shoe leather. "Oh," he finally said. "Yeah, I've heard of you."

"May I sit down?"

"Um, yeah, sure. I'd offer you a drink but there isn't anything in the house."

"Not even water?"

"Well there's water but—"

Sam fell silent when Lord Iron nodded to one of the guards, who left the room and headed to the kitchen.

"Firstly, I'd like to offer you my deepest condolences on the death of your wife, Mr Westonville."

"You heard about that quick. Do you visit all spouses of your deceased employees on the same day?"

"These are difficult times, but surely not so difficult that one cannot maintain one's manners?"

Sam cleared his throat and sat down in one of the armchairs. "Sorry. It's not the best time. And I don't usually get the secret service over for tea, you know?"

Lord Iron glanced at the remaining guard. "Take no notice of them." The other one returned with a glass of water. Lord Iron took it, thanked him and sipped. "Hard water in this area."

"I don't want to be rude…" Sam said.

“I’m sure you’re wondering why I’m here. Well, it’s a rather delicate topic. I wanted to see how you were coping first. How are your injuries?”

Sam frowned. “Sore.”

Lord Iron nodded. “They could have been much worse. Mr Westonville—may I call you Samuel?”

“I prefer Sam.”

“Sam, whilst I appreciate good manners, I like to get to the point. Your wife died prematurely.”

“I know.” Sam clenched his teeth.

“And I believe one of my employees is responsible, a Mr Neugent. Are you aware of him?”

Sam’s heart began to race for a different reason. “Yes. Do you know what he’s been doing?”

“I know there’s a worrying pattern. And I know you and I could work well together. You’ve already demonstrated a remarkable ability to act under pressure.”

“Look, just tell me straight, what do you want?”

“I want you to come and work for me Sam. And I want your first assignment to be dealing with Neugent.”

“You own CoFerrum Inc?”

“Yes.”

“Then you’re his *über*-boss, you can sort him out better than I possibly can.”

“There are many things I can and will do. I just thought you’d want to be personally involved.” Lord Iron put the glass down. “You’ve been wronged. I’m offering you the chance to put it right yourself. If you’re not interested, then, by all means, grieve and put your life back together in

whatever way you wish. But if you want to make sure that what happened to you doesn't happen to anyone else, I'm the best person to help you."

"I'm not sure we have the same ideas about putting things right."

Lord Iron laughed. No one else in the room did. "Perhaps not."

"Right now, I want to fucking kill him."

"We can discuss that."

Sam's eyebrows shot up. "You want me to be your hitman?"

"Sam, this isn't a computer game. The way I see it is this: your wife was under my protection."

"Yeah, we need to talk about what that means."

Lord Iron raised a hand. "Indeed, we do, but suffice to say I'm deeply disturbed by what happened to your wife whilst under my protection, and I feel a personal responsibility to see this matter dealt with. I think you have a certain…affinity for things that could result in a very different life for you. One that's satisfying and would prevent other parties taking advantage of your talents."

Sam thought of Ekstrand. "I'm not very talented by all accounts."

"Nonsense. You just haven't been given the right opportunities. I'm not waving a magic wand here, Sam. I'm not promising anything other than the chance to address an injustice against you. And a salaried position, should you be in need of one."

"Do you know anyone called Mr Ekstrand?"

Lord Iron nodded. "You're concerned about how he'd react should you accept my offer?"

"Something like that."

"There's no need to worry. He and I have an understanding. Besides, you're not his property."

"I'm not yours either."

“I’m sorry if I gave that impression at any point.”

Sam wondered whether to ask if he knew about Lord Poppy too but decided it would be best not to speak his name. If they knew each other, Iron would want to know why Sam did and he didn’t want to have that conversation.

“Don’t be intimidated by all this, Sam.” He waved a hand at the guards flanking the sofa, misinterpreting Sam’s silence. “These men are here to protect me, not threaten you. If you want me to leave and never seek you out again, just say the word. If you need time to think, I can give that to you, but I do want to deal with Neugent sooner rather than later. If you’d rather take the time to grieve and leave him to me, I can return in a few months’ time. It’s all up to you.”

“And what would happen if I said yes?”

“I would invite you to come with me to my home. It’s safer there and more relaxed. We’ll discuss a salary, any needs you have and I’ll answer your questions. Should you wish to accept my offer you’d be welcome to stay there as a guest, have company accommodation or funding to purchase a new house.”

“I already have a house.”

“Bath isn’t a convenient location. I’d give you a generous relocation package.”

Sam looked around the room. He’d already decided he wanted to sell the house. He had no job, no prospects and all he knew he wanted was to ruin Neugent’s life. The man sitting in front of him was offering the chance to do that and whilst a part of him was worried about what that would entail, he mostly didn’t care what happened after Neugent had been dealt with. There was very little else in his life now.

“All right,” Sam said. “I’ll come with you, just to talk about how this could work. I’m not promising anything. And I’m not agreeing to anything until we’ve had a serious conversation. OK?”

“Fine by me.” Lord Iron smiled. “I think this could be the beginning of a most mutually beneficial relationship.”

We’ll see about that, Sam thought, but still shook his hand and managed a noncommittal smile.

27

“Mr Ekstrand, you’ll be late!” Petra was at the doorway to the sitting room and smiled at Max when she noticed him.

“I’m not going to the Moot,” Ekstrand said, arms folded.

“It looks like the Sorcerer of Essex made a deal with Lady Rose,” Max said.

“You got that from Thorn?” Petra asked

“Thorn was angry with the Prince for not protecting them, so he was remarkably cooperative,” Ekstrand said.

“I made sure he was telling the truth,” Max added.

“Is that why the gargoyle is hiding in the cupboard under the stairs?” Petra asked. “I heard whimpering. Shouldn’t you check on it?”

“There are more important things to deal with.”

“It’s all an infernal mess.” Ekstrand left his spot by the fireplace to pace the room. “The Prince is involved in all of the business with the Master of Ceremonies, and Thorn said Rose made a deal with the Sorcerer of Essex. If Dante truly has made a deal with her, it could explain the stone hearts. I don’t know how, exactly, but that’s what my instincts are telling me. If Dante has created a foul hybrid sorcery my personal wards may not protect me at the Moot. The castle’s wards only keep every living thing that’s not one of the seven outside, which is useless when one of them may try to kill me. So I’m not going.”

“But you called everyone together, Mr Ekstrand. If they convene and nothing happens, they’ll be very angry with you.”

“Petra, I would rather have a heart heavy with the need to write a few apology letters than one made of stone, wouldn’t you?”

She nodded. “Well, I have something new to bring to the table. Whoever or whatever killed the people in the cloister damaged the building. I found hairline cracks in the four towers. I’m assuming they weren’t there before.”

“They weren’t,” Max replied. “What made you look for them?”

“I wasn’t looking, to be honest. I needed a break, I went for a walk around the perimeter and noticed them then.”

Ekstrand nodded. “Everyone was killed at the same time…cracks in the building they were inside…Max, meet me here in three hours. We’ll go to the Moot then.”

“When it’s over?”

“Yes. And not a moment before.” Ekstrand left the room.

Petra looked at Max. “Could Dante have really made a deal with a Fae?”

“According to Thorn he did. We don’t know why or what the details are, but it explains why the Rosas were ignored by the Arbiters in North London—that’s in Essex territory. Dante probably offered immunity for the Rosas in return for knowledge of Rose Charms.”

“But why would a Sorcerer ever want to truck with the Fae?”

“I’m sure Mr Ekstrand is asking the same question,” Max said, struggling to his feet. “I’m going to get some sleep whilst I can.”

She touched his arm as he hobbled past. “You’ll check on the gargoyle, won’t you?”

“I wasn’t planning to,” he replied and went up to his room.

Max had just got comfortable when the door opened. He didn’t bother to open his eyes, he already knew what it was.

The gargoyle came to the bedside, still silent thanks to the new formulae. “I want to make sure Cathy is all right. I want us to go to Mundanus and find out whether she made it.”

“No.”

“But—”

“Either she died or she’s just badly injured. Either way there’s nothing to be done about it.”

The gargoyle couldn’t argue with that. “What will the Sorcerer do with Thorn?”

“Probably post him back to Exilium when he’s sure we don’t need him anymore.”

“It was awful, what you did.”

Max opened his eyes and turned to face the stone frown. “It was a means to an end.” The gargoyle said nothing. Max closed his eyes again. “I’m going to sleep. If you want to be upset go somewhere else.”

“Easy for you to say.” The gargoyle left him to sleep.

Will inspected his finery and checked that his hair and close shave were perfect and his sword and scabbard positioned correctly. He briefly fingered the elegant pommel, remembering the day it was presented to him by his father. A week later he’d set off on his Grand Tour with it secreted in his luggage, protected by a Charm to ensure no mundane saw it. He wore it in various Maharajas’ courts in India, in the great Salon at São Paulo, at the costumed ball in New York and in the Parisian Court. He’d never had to actually use it and he’d never worn it to Exilium before, but his instinct told him he needed to make a point, and he was prepared to do whatever it took to see justice done.

On the Tour he'd seen examples of mundane justice, from people being arrested for drunken behaviour in Crete to people being beaten by a local drug lord in South America. Whilst Oliver had been laid up with a dreadful cold, Will had spent a rather interesting evening chatting to a man released from prison after a ten-year sentence in the American Midwest. The stories the man had told him would stay with Will for the rest of his life. They made him glad he was only visiting their world and not actually living in it.

In Society justice was dispensed in a variety of ways, depending on the city one lived in and the family one belonged to, and was settled by duels more often than not. The situation with Bartholomew was complicated by the fact that there was no Duke in Londinium to address the grievance. It was of such severity that Will didn't feel he could approach the Marquis of Westminster, and besides, he wanted to deal with it directly. If he was going to confront a man two hundred and twenty-five years his senior, one who was likely to be the next Duke of Londinium, Will wanted to be sure he had the blessing of his patron.

When he was satisfied his appearance was acceptable Will took a deep breath and said to the mirror, "Lord Iris, I beg an audience with you."

The glass rippled immediately, suggesting his request had been expected, and rapidly shifted from a wavering reflection of his dressing room to a view into Exilium. Will stepped through.

He'd been to Exilium twice before and even though he was expecting it the beauty of the place still amazed him. He could see the copse of trees ahead and a blue iris bobbing in the gentle breeze. The air was fresh and filled with fragrance. Will permitted himself one moment to appreciate it before moving forwards, remembering to keep the desire to speak to his patron foremost in his mind.

The path through the trees was clear and he walked purposefully, not too quickly, not too slowly.

Will heard a raised voice as he went further into the copse.

“I gave her to you in good faith. You knew she was my favourite, you knew how special she is, and yet you let this happen?”

Lord Poppy. Will hadn’t expected him to be there.

“I did not allow her to be attacked. Don’t be absurd,” Lord Iris replied, his voice just as even and cold as it ever was. “She was in Mundanus. I’m flattered you assume everything is under my control, but it’s not.”

“Why was she there? Mundanus smells and she should be with your boy making beautiful babies, not amongst the unwashed and ugly!”

“Perhaps he can explain that himself.”

Will entered the clearing. Lord Iris was seated on his chair carved from the tree stump, surrounded by the latticework dome. Lord Poppy was standing next to him holding his cane like a major’s baton. Whilst Lord Iris looked at Will with cool interest, Lord Poppy came towards him so fast he didn’t register the movement.

“You! I was there when you swore the oath to protect her in front of the great Oak. What pathetic attempt at a husband are you?” Before Will could defend himself, Poppy turned to Iris. “I demand his freedom. He will be my slave and I’ll remind him of the importance of keeping oaths for eternity!”

“You will have no such thing, Poppy,” Iris replied. “You know he’s required elsewhere.”

“I have suffered such distress, such misery!” Poppy moaned. “You don’t understand what an agony it is. Let me go to her at least, let me stroke her hand and—”

“No. She’s an Iris now. Either calm yourself or leave. There’s work to be done.”

“You have a glacial heart.” Poppy sniffed and looked back at Will. “This isn’t over.”

Will remained silent, taking heart in the fact that Iris was protecting him. His patron beckoned him closer. Poppy stalked him across the clearing until he knelt before Lord Iris and bowed his head. “Thank you for receiving me, my Lord.”

“William, do you have an answer for Lord Poppy?”

“I do, and more, my Lord.” He’d predicted Lord Iris would want to know why Cathy was there in the first place and decided that a lie as close to the truth as possible was the best solution. “Catherine was in Mundanus to spend time with a child, something I arranged in the hope it would ignite excitement about our starting a family.”

“Why?” Lord Iris tilted his head as he scrutinised Will. “Her excitement isn’t a prerequisite. You will have a family regardless of how she feels.”

“Forgive me, my Lord, but, having fallen in love with Catherine, I place a great deal of importance on how she feels.” It was a gamble but he had been told by his father that Lord Poppy was a romantic. If Will appeared to be the hapless love-struck husband, it might serve the dual purpose of placating Poppy whilst convincing Iris he was committed to having a child.

“You love her?” Poppy asked, bending to peer closely at Will. “Truly?”

“I do, Lord Poppy.” It seemed to be working.

“Then why put her at risk?” the Fae shrieked, his face contorting with rage. “Why not keep her at home? She could paint pictures and skip from room to room, saying funny little things and being surprising.”

Will doubted Cathy had ever skipped in her entire life. “Paint, my Lord?”

“Poppy, how they choose to spend their time is irrelevant as long as marital duties are performed.” He looked back at Will. “Continue.”

“There was no way to predict such a brutal attack, my Lord,” Will said. “I’ve been tireless in my efforts to identify the individual behind it and I’m here to seek your blessing in dealing with them.”

“You know who tried to kill my favourite?” Lord Poppy had shifted from fury to excitement faster than Will could take a breath. “Tell me who it is and I will peel the—”

“Poppy,” Iris interjected, “you will not act without my sanction. Catherine Reticulata-Iris is mine and how this is dealt with will be my decision.”

Poppy’s lips pressed tight together and he inclined his head at Iris. “Of course, dear Iris, of course. Forgive me.”

Both of the Fae looked to Will expectantly. “The assassin was sent by Bartholomew Semper-Augustus-Tulipa in an attempt to sabotage my pursuit of the Ducal seat.”

“A Tulipa!” Poppy straightened. “Really?”

“That’s surprising,” Iris said. “I don’t like surprises.”

“I positively adore them, usually,” Poppy said. “But this one is simply confusing. Are you sure?”

“I wouldn’t say it were I not sure, Lord Poppy. I found it difficult to believe myself but evidence from an Arbiter and a trusted third party have proved it to be true.”

“This Bartholomew is the one Lord Tulip has been boasting about,” Lord Iris said as he stared out into the clearing. Will felt himself relax now Iris’s attention was elsewhere, as if his patron’s gaze had been physically holding him. “I never thought the noble Tulipas would sink so low.”

“I don’t believe it,” Poppy said firmly. “There must be a mistake.”

“The assassin confessed to a trusted source and an Arbiter confirmed the presence of a Tulipa at the scene.” Will feared he would be accused of

ineptitude.

“Interesting,” Lord Iris said. He looked at Poppy. “One can hardly doubt an Arbiter. You have no doubts, William?”

“None, my Lord.”

“But Tulip hasn’t—” Poppy began but Iris silenced him again.

“We all know how much the Tulipas have coveted the Londinium throne. They see it as theirs by right. I imagine this Tulipa would do anything to be Duke. Sometimes a desperate man does desperate things, wouldn’t you agree, William?”

Will nodded, chilled.

“Even resort to stabbing a woman married into a powerful family known to be a favourite of a prominent Lord. If that doesn’t embody desperation I have no idea what could.” He looked at Poppy. “We have been insulted, have we not?”

Poppy nodded. “More than insulted, *wounded*. I expect compensation.”

“That will be discussed.” Lord Iris redirected his gaze back to Will. “I should imagine you are most aggrieved.”

“Indeed, my Lord. I beg your permission to address this insult.”

“It would start a war,” Iris said.

“That’s why I seek your blessing, my Lord. Whilst I’m keen to act, I’m also aware of the political instability in Londinium.”

“I’m pleased by your restraint,” Iris said. “Well-directed passion is a formidable force. See how well I chose a match for your favourite, Poppy?” Iris regarded the trees and flowers, deep in thought. “We cannot allow this to go unpunished. Catherine is important to us both, is she not, Poppy?”

“You know how I feel, as much as you deride me for it.”

“William,” Lord Iris said, “you will have my permission and my help too. But you need to be committed. If you accept, once this begins you must

see it through. There will be no opportunity to reconsider and no possibility of withdrawal.”

Will bowed his head lower, caught between the thrill of being offered a boon without any involvement of his father or Patroon, and the fear of what it could be. “I’m yours, Lord Iris. If you believe me to be worthy of your aid, then I’ll seek perfection in its execution.”

“Excellent.” Lord Iris rested his hand on Will’s head. “This is how it will be.”

28

The gargoyle said nothing as Max went downstairs to answer the summons from Mr Ekstrand. Max had slept well, like he always did, and once he'd had another dose of painkillers from Axon he felt ready to tackle whatever task the Sorcerer had for him.

Axon directed him to the ballroom and he entered after his knock was answered. The mirror was once again at the centre of concentric circles of wards. Ekstrand was wearing his cloak and held his silver-tipped cane.

"I'm going to open a Way to the castle," Ekstrand said. "You'll arrive just inside the curtain wall, in Mundanus. It's night there so it'll be locked and should be empty of innocents. Use your Peeper to look into the outer gatehouse—it will be directly in front of you. If it's empty, the Moot is over. Report back to me immediately. I'll keep the Way open."

"Yes, sir," Max replied and pulled the Peeper from his pocket.

He stepped through once Ekstrand had opened the Way. The air was fresh and cool against his skin after several days of being in the Nether. Max walked as fast as his limp permitted towards the wall of the inner gatehouse. The high limestone curtain wall kept him out of sight of the town and any innocents still on the street.

Rushden Castle had been the location of the Moots for centuries but Max had never actually been there. It was the first time he'd set foot on the Isle of Man. It was independent of any of the seven kingdoms in the Heptarchy and therefore considered neutral enough to provide a location for the Sorcerers to meet. The medieval castle was remarkably well preserved

because none of the Sorcerers wanted the mundane anchor of their meeting-place to degrade. The innocents got a museum and heritage site and the Sorcerers had one fewer thing to squabble about. On balance, Max considered it to be a good deal.

Max placed the Peeper against the wall and twisted the soapstone circles that housed its lenses in opposite directions until the deep amber glow of torchlight shone through. He peered into the small stone room and didn't see anyone at first glance. He was about to pull the Peeper away when it occurred to him to move it down the wall. When he saw the dead apprentice lying near the door he removed the Peeper and stepped back through into the ballroom. Ekstrand closed the Way.

"The Moot's over," Max said. "There's a dead apprentice in the gatehouse."

Ekstrand said nothing as he stood there, staring at the tip of the cane. "We go through," he finally said, "the three of us, to the reflected castle."

"Yes, sir," Max replied and the gargoyle came closer as another Way was opened.

They followed Ekstrand through into the inner bailey, this time in the misty grey light of the Nether. The building looked exactly the same, both it and the curtain wall made of the same limestone; the only difference was the torchlight shining out of the arrow slits and tiny medieval windows.

The gargoyle went to the corner of the keep, nose to the ground and sniffing like a hound on the trail of a fox. It ran its heavy claws lightly over the stone. "There are cracks here."

"Just like at the Cloister," Max said as Ekstrand inspected them.

"I need to know whether the Sorcerers are still here," Ekstrand said. "I expect they're already dead, and that whatever foul sorcery Dante worked here is done, but I won't take the risk of going inside."

“I understand.” Max headed towards the door.

“Wait. The wards on the Keep will kill anyone who’s not one of the seven ruling Sorcerers of the Heptarchy. It will take me a long time to break them alone.”

“They would still work against an Arbiter?”

“Absolutely. Security would be horribly compromised otherwise. The wards aren’t dependent on the illegal entrant having a soul, they’re dependent on there being critical differences in parameters we use to identify ourselves and the person trying to enter. However…”

He looked at the gargoyle, which stopped sniffing the wall and then shrank against it. “What?”

“The gargoyle might be able to go through.”

“Might?”

“If it isn’t possible, you’ll simply be unable to progress. There’s no risk.”

“Oh, good. So at best I’ll be able to go inside the building of doom. Brilliant. I’m so thrilled.”

“We have to try,” Max said. “We need to know now.”

“And it isn’t as if you have to worry about your heart being turned to stone,” Ekstrand added. “You don’t have a heart and you’re already made of stone. Perfect. In you go.”

With a wrinkled muzzle and quiet grumbling the gargoyle made its way towards the door. Ekstrand unlocked it with a huge key covered in formulae and then stepped back. The gargoyle gave Max one last look before it reached for the handle, opened the door and went inside.

“Well, I’m not dead,” it called out after a moment. “Or…less animated than I should be. I can’t hear anyone either.”

“Go to the Lord’s Presence Chamber,” Ekstrand said. “That’s where they’ll be if they’re still there.”

As they waited Max inspected the cracks in the limestone and Ekstrand paced. It wasn’t long before the gargoyle came back to the entrance.

“Do you want the good news or the bad news?”

“What?” Ekstrand marched over.

“OK, the bad news is that they’re all dead. Maybe that’s good news, I don’t know.”

“What’s the good news?” Max asked as Ekstrand covered his eyes and sagged a little.

“It isn’t all of them.”

Ekstrand dragged his hand down his face. “Who’s missing?”

“I don’t know, I’ve never seen them before. But there are only five.”

“It makes sense,” Max said. “Dante killed them and left.”

“Bring the bodies out to us,” Ekstrand instructed the gargoyle and it went back inside the keep.

“We shouldn’t stay here too long,” Max said. “Dante may expect us to return.”

“If he’d left a trap, we would be suffering already,” Ekstrand replied. “Check for any residues whilst the bodies are brought out.”

Max wound the Sniffer as the gargoyle deposited the first body at Ekstrand’s feet. “Northumbria,” he said, and crouched down to close the dead Sorcerer’s eyes. “Could be jolly on a good day. Excellent watchmaker.”

Max kept an eye on the Sniffer as it whirred gently and sucked the air through the funnel on its top. Before it returned the results the second body had been brought out and laid next to the first.

“Sussex.” Ekstrand closed the eyes with some reverence. “Strange fixation on tadpoles and astute mathematician. I won’t miss his bad breath.”

Max read the Sniffer at the sound of the tiny *ping*. “Rose, sir, like before, very strong.”

Ekstrand nodded, grim-faced, and the third body was carried out to him.

“Kent. Cantankerous old fool with very strange ideas about underwear. Never should have been one of the seven, in my opinion.” His eyes were still closed gently.

Once the Sniffer had retracted and was in his pocket Max looked at the dead Sorcerers. They looked like sleeping old men, not some of the most powerful individuals in Albion. All had grey hair, all were grey-faced, all had large noses and ears with bunches of wiry hair growing from them.

The fourth body was laid down and Ekstrand closed his eyes. He was younger than the others and had more hair, mostly brown. “East Anglia.” Ekstrand sighed. “Young pup, only held the throne for three hundred years or so. Fascinating chap, if you’re interested in coastal defences. Which I am, on Thursdays.”

Max had never heard Ekstrand talk about the other Sorcerers like people before. He knew there had been wars over the centuries and as a result practically no trust existed, but somehow they still functioned as a collective. Now there would be Chapter Masters all over the country without the guidance and resources of a Sorcerer. The only party who could benefit from the inevitable chaos would be the Fae.

“Why would Dante do this?” he asked Ekstrand, but received no reply.

“This is the last one in that chamber,” the gargoyle said, and eased the body off its shoulder onto the ground.

“This can’t be right! That’s Dante! That’s the Sorcerer of Essex.”

“So Mercia is behind this,” Max said.

“I should have known!” Ekstrand pressed his balled fists into his temples. “Bloody Mercia! It all makes sense now—he’s always coveted Wessex, he knew I’d call a Moot and that he’d kill me here. He just didn’t count on me staying away.”

“But why kill all the others?” Max asked. “And why would there be corruption in London and nowhere else?”

“That we know of,” Ekstrand replied. “For all we know, the puppets may be running riot in Mercia too!”

Max looked down at Dante. His dead eyes were still open, reflecting the silver sky. He struggled to reach down and close them as Ekstrand cursed the Sorcerer of Mercia in several languages without drawing breath.

“There’s no one else inside the keep,” the gargoyle said but Ekstrand didn’t hear it.

“Look again,” Max said. “We need to be certain.” The gargoyle sloped off. Eventually Ekstrand paused to draw a breath. “What now, sir?”

“Well, that’s obvious, isn’t it?” Ekstrand replied. “War.”

Will stepped through the Way Lord Iris had made for him at the edge of the clearing. “I expect nothing less than perfection,” his patron had whispered in his ear moments before and Will felt the pressure acutely.

The Way closed once he was through and he was alone in a wide corridor, in front of impressive wooden doors. It sounded like a large gathering of people was in the room on the other side of them. Will took a moment to look around and then went closer to listen before entering.

There was a round of polite applause and a call for quiet. “My first act as Duke of Londinium—”

Will leaped away from the door. That was Bartholomew's voice, without a doubt. There was over a week left, how—

Then he realised Lord Iris had chosen the time and place of his arrival back in the Nether. Several days had passed during the few minutes he'd been with his patron and he'd been sent back into the Nether reflection of Somerset House, the location of the Londinium Court. The reason behind it was clear; Lord Iris still wanted Will to take the throne. He'd just given him a different means to do so.

He stifled a burst of panic as the full extent of how he'd been used became apparent. After a few moments focused on his breathing, Will concluded that nothing had actually changed; Lord Iris had always intended him to make a play for the throne. The only thing that had altered was the way he was going to do it and the fact that Bartholomew was already Duke.

He had to focus on what Iris and Poppy had gifted him. There was no going back and no other option. His patron demanded perfection.

Will opened the doors onto the throne room. The air was hot with the press of people and filled with a riot of perfumes. It was a grand space, two stories high, used by the mundanes as an art gallery. The walls in the Nether room were filled with framed mirrors instead of art as a precaution against the use of Charms in political discussions.

At the far end of the room was a low dais with two gilded chairs upon it, one smaller than the other. The Tulipas sat as Duke and Duchess, and the head of the Digitalis family stood next to Bartholomew, holding the sceptre that indicated he'd thus far retained his position as Marquis of Westminster.

"You're late, Will!" Freddy's voice boomed across the room, making everyone turn and look at him. "Shame you missed the best bit. I thought you planned to stand. Would have been a damn sight more interesting."

He chuckled and the rest of the room fell silent as they watched Will enter, his eyes fixed on Bartholomew. He thought of Sophia's perfect skin scarred forever, he thought of the terror Cathy must have felt and the sight of her lying in the hospital bed, her jaw black, her chest in bandages. He distilled it all into a single sharp point and the men and women of the Court parted as he made his way towards the throne.

"William." Bartholomew smiled. "I was wondering when we'd see you. I too thought you'd be here earlier. I hope nothing untoward has delayed you?"

Will suppressed a knee-jerk response to Bartholomew's feigned ignorance. Instead, he walked up to the lowest step and said, "Bartholomew Semper-Augustus-Tulipa, I accuse you of the attempted murder of my wife Catherine Reticulata-Iris and demand your immediate resignation from the Ducal seat you obtained by foul means."

As his wife paled Bartholomew's face was the perfect picture of shock and indignation. The crowd burst into a gabble of gasps, commentary and a burst of expletives from Viola, but Will ignored them all.

"William, what are you saying?" Bartholomew finally replied. "What happened to Catherine? Is she well?"

"She almost died. You sent an assassin to kill my wife and it's my right to demand you step down and answer for your crime."

Bartholomew stood, rested a hand briefly on Margritte's shoulder and went to the edge of the dais. "William, I did no such thing. I have no idea what madness has possessed you to walk in here minutes after I've been declared Duke and accuse me of an utterly despicable act, but I beg you to withdraw to a private room with myself and the Marquis to discuss what has happened."

“There is no need to discuss anything. I know you’re responsible and, if you will not step down, then I claim the right to challenge the throne by combat.”

Bartholomew’s eyes were wide with horror as Freddy muscled his way to the front. “What is this nonsense?” he boomed, dropping his huge hand on Will’s shoulder. “Has the devil taken you? You’re making a fool of yourself, even I can see that. The Duke has been generous enough to give you a way to withdraw. Be grateful, young blood, and take the offer.”

“Remove your hand, sir,” Will said through his teeth. “This has nothing to do with you.”

Viola tutted, shaking his head. “I just don’t like to see a young lad lose badly.”

Will rounded on him. “He tried to kill my wife!” His voice rang off the mirrors, amplified by the dreadful hush of the assembled. “It’s my right, damn it.” He looked at the Marquis. “You know this is true!”

Digitalis tugged at his cravat, his face pink at the sudden attention. “There is a precedent,” he said to Bartholomew. “If a challenge to the throne is made in open Court, the Duke must respond. If it’s resolved by combat and the challenger is victorious, he has the right to take the Dukedom.”

The words elicited a roar of speculation. Will shut it out as best he could to study Bartholomew’s face. His forehead shone with sweat and he was determined to maintain his act of the innocent wrongly accused. Bartholomew looked back at his wife, whose eyes were shining with tears, and then looked down at Will. “Is there nothing I can say to dissuade you from this course of action?”

“No.”

“Then I must respond to your accusation. I did not send an assassin to kill your wife, William. There is nothing in this world that would make me commit such a heinous act. But whoever has convinced you of this has been most persuasive. I have no choice but to accept your challenge.”

“Bartholomew, don’t pay attention to the whelp,” Freddy said, but the Duke held up his hand.

“I cannot ignore this.” He looked at the Marquis. “Here and now?”

“Yes, your Grace. A direct challenge to the throne requires an immediate duel to the death.”

Margritte was on her feet. “William, think of your wife, she needs you.”

“Don’t assume I’ll lose,” Will said. He tossed his frock coat aside, drew his sword and stepped towards the centre of the room.

The crowd drew back to the edges as Bartholomew lifted off the heavy ducal livery collar of golden oak leaves and laid it reverently on the throne. He then went to Margritte, bent down and kissed her. The tenderness of the act irritated Will. He carved a figure-of-eight in the air with his rapier and the whooshing of the blade through the air satisfied him.

Will tried to ignore the fact that he hadn’t trained properly for several weeks. He did his best to block out Freddy’s pitying look and Bartholomew’s total confidence as he removed his jacket, drew his rapier and came down into the centre of the room. He looked sad, as if he had to put a favourite pet down, rather than fight off a serious contender to the throne and defend his honour.

“I’m sorry it’s come to this, Will.” He took his position opposite. “We could have been very good friends.”

Will remained silent. He had to use his boons wisely or he was going to die. He held up the hilt in front of his face, tip of the sword pointing to the ceiling, to indicate he was ready. Bartholomew shook his head sadly and

then mirrored the movement before easing into a comfortable on-guard stance. His back was straight, shoulders relaxed, sword in his right hand.

There was a predictable exchange. Bartholomew was limbering up and testing his responses. Will remembered countless sparring matches with Nathaniel, who accompanied every one of his mistakes with an insult. Nathaniel was an expert in ridiculing whilst fighting, something Will had always wanted to be able to do with the same aplomb. He'd found it impossible to develop such a skill when constantly on the receiving end. What it did teach him, however, was not to be distracted by anything said once the fight had begun.

Seeing an opening, Will went in with an attack. Bartholomew anticipated it and parried expertly, answering with a riposte that sliced into Will's shirt.

"Excellent, Barty!" Freddy shouted.

Bartholomew backed off and Will stole a glance at the cut fabric. There was a tiny amount of blood and no pain. That slice should have cut him badly. One down, two left.

Bartholomew had moved far more quickly than he should have and Will knew he had employed a Charm, no doubt one of many at his disposal. Will just had to hit him once, just once, but every time he moved to strike he was parried or his blade thrust into air after Bartholomew had expertly side-stepped.

"Regret it now, boy?" Freddy heckled.

"Quiet, Freddy," Bartholomew said. "This isn't the time."

Will parried an attack, evaded another and very narrowly parried a third. He was working at the peak of his ability whilst Bartholomew was just warming up.

“I didn’t send anyone to kill Catherine,” Bartholomew said. “How you could think I would do such a thing I will never understand.”

“Don’t worry, you won’t have much longer to ponder the question,” Will replied and Freddy roared with laughter.

Bartholomew smiled and then his blade was slashing Will’s chest. It happened so fast Bartholomew was withdrawing before Will even realised he’d been hit. Again, his opponent gave him the chance to see the wound. His shirt was so badly cut his chest was mostly exposed along with a pale red mark, like a scratch from a cat. A single drop of blood was running towards his belly button. He only had one more left.

Bartholomew raised an eyebrow. “Your patron favours you, it seems.”

“He understands my desire to protect my family and see justice done.”

“Is he cheating, Barty?” Freddy boomed.

“No,” Bartholomew replied. “He’s fortunate, that’s all.”

Another flurry of attacks and parries. Will felt his shirt clinging to his back as sweat rolled down it. He tried to recall all the times he’d managed to strike Nathaniel; there’d been so few of them he could usually remember them with little effort. Now his life was in the balance it was harder, but one did surface.

It was, on the face of it, no more than a traditional feint. It was the lead-up that had snared Nathaniel and it wasn’t something that Will had intended. He’d got angry, slashed ineffectually and then decided to give up. Then he’d noticed Nathaniel lowered his guard, just for a second and he exploited it. Nathaniel gave him a gash on the arm and a good beating in return, but it had been worth it.

Will waited for the next attack and defended himself but pretended to foul up his footwork.

“You’ve got him scared, Barty!” Freddy called out, just as Will predicted he would, and in response he launched himself forward with a flurry of furious attacks. None got through Bartholomew’s expert defence but they were enough to give the impression of desperation.

Will retreated, letting himself pant audibly. Freddy jeered and Will concentrated on letting his shoulders drop, making his stance loose and his expression hopeless.

Bartholomew looked like a man who wanted to be elsewhere. “This is pointless.” He glanced up at the ceiling as if searching for an answer in the heavens. It was the moment Will had been hoping for and he lunged forward with the perfect strike. Any other man would have been run through but Bartholomew twisted in time to reduce the injury to a cut on his stomach.

It was enough.

To everyone else Bartholomew would just look shaken, natural when injured for the first time in a duel, especially one in which the abilities were so mismatched. But Will could see his eyes glaze and his grip on his sword altered, as if he was doubting the feedback from his hand. Poppy had promised an instant effect and he hadn’t exaggerated.

Bartholomew blinked rapidly, adjusted his stance and made an attack but it was slower and Will parried it easily. It was like fighting someone of his own ability instead of a man with over two hundred years of experience on him and Charms to speed his reflexes. Will felt a rush of confidence, then reined it in. The duel wasn’t over yet and he could only survive one more strike before he was completely on his own.

He lunged and Bartholomew parried, but he had to work hard to do it in time. Attack, parry, riposte; Will could see Poppy’s opiate charm taking hold. Will feinted then stepped in and ran Bartholomew through, just as his

blade skewered Will an inch above his hip. They were caught on each other's blades briefly, then Bartholomew staggered backwards and Will pulled his blade from his gut.

Margritte's screams filled the room as her husband collapsed, his sword still stuck in Will's side. Will pulled the blade out and laid it at Bartholomew's feet, marvelling at the lack of pain.

As Bartholomew's blood pooled Will felt his thigh muscles twitch, his heartbeat deafening. The Marquis rushed to Bartholomew's side and both Freddy and Margritte pushed people out of the way as they closed in around him and Will.

The Tulipa's rattling breath could be heard when Margritte reached him, her screams dying in her throat as she fell to her knees at his side.

"Will." Bartholomew reached towards him with a hand covered in his own blood.

Will approached, taking care to keep away from Freddy, who looked ready to throttle him.

"I'm here."

"I didn't send anyone to kill Catherine. I swear it. On my family's honour, on the life of my wife and children."

Will clenched his jaw as a flicker of panic rose up from his gut. "My sources say otherwise."

"Lies," Bartholomew whispered and his head lolled towards Margritte.

Will stepped back, not wanting to overhear the last words spoken between man and wife. Freddy was glaring at him and Will faced him fully.

"Say it."

"You've done a terrible thing, William Iris," Freddy growled. "A terrible thing."

A guttural moan from Margritte told him Bartholomew had died. He straightened. “I acted with my Patron’s blessing and I saw justice done for my family. If you or anyone else here has a problem with that, you’re setting yourself against not only me but the entirety of the Iris family.”

Freddy was a social oaf, but it seemed he was no fool when it came to picking fights. He knew that if he took his grievance further in public, he would drag his family into a war without the support of his elders or his patron. Freddy settled back into a steady glowering, then wrenched his gaze away from Will to Bartholomew and his face twisted in grief.

The Marquis cleared his throat and made his way back to the dais. The assembled watched him in stunned silence as Margritte’s awful sobbing filled the room. Will looked at the throne and tried to think only of Lord Iris and how pleased he would be, anything to try and block the sound out.

“In accordance with ancient law,” the Marquis began in a tremulous voice, “the Ducal seat of Londinium passes to the successful challenger who proved his right to rule with victory in combat.”

He beckoned to Will who walked up the steps. Bartholomew’s blood was drying on his blade, his shirt was slashed and he smelt of sweat.

“I, the Marquis of Westminster, do hereby recognise William Reticulata-Iris as the Duke of Londinium, granting him the rights and privileges of the rulership of Londinium. If there are any here who will not recognise his right to take the throne, speak now.”

Will held his breath as the Londinium Court stared at him in silence. A man bearing a strong family resemblance to Freddy was in close conference with him; Will assumed he was counselling Freddy to remain silent. He looked at the Peonia who had been so stubborn, now looking at the floor uncomfortably. The Wisteria contingent were frantically whispering to each other.

But no one spoke out. Will was under no illusion that he was being welcomed by the Court; they all knew Iris had personally supported his challenge.

Satisfied that form had been kept, the Marquis retrieved the collar from the throne and placed it on Will's shoulders. It was reassuringly heavy and Will appreciated that he had succeeded.

"Long live the Duke of Londinium," the Marquis hailed as Will sat on the throne. The Court echoed the call but Will suspected they'd cheered louder when Bartholomew had ascended earlier that evening. He looked out over their faces and saw no warmth, no respect. He watched Margritte being guided out of the room as Freddy laid his cloak over Bartholomew's body. Will knew the battle for Londinium had only just begun.

Acknowledgments

I’d like to thank Jennifer Udden of DMLA once again for great feedback on an early draft of this book and also Lee Harris. Both of you made this book so much better.

I remember, with love and grief and gratitude, the hours that my late best friend, Kate, listened to me read this book aloud. She laughed at the right bits, gasped when Will did something she didn’t expect and believed in this series with such passion that it helped me believe in it too. I miss you and will always love you.

I’d also like to thank my husband, Peter, for…well, everything really.

Lastly, but certainly not least (I so want to say leastly but I must resist), I’d like to thank my Mum for spotting a rather glaring error—the sort that would have come back to haunt me a thousand times over on the internet, no doubt. Thanks Mum!

All Is Fair

The Split Worlds: Book Three

Emma Newman

For the one who sewed as she listened

1

Fifteen hours after the Sorcerer announced it was the perfect day to take over the Agency, Max finished the preparations. He sat in the chair at the head of the table in the Agency's largest meeting room, satisfied his sweep of the area was complete. There were no indications of sorcerous magic, no residue of Fae magic picked up by the Sniffer, and the traps were laid. He looked at the gargoyle standing by the window ready to give the signal. It looked back at him, eager for something to happen in a way Max couldn't remember.

"Tell Ekstrand we're ready," he said and the gargoyle closed the curtains, counted five seconds and then opened them again.

"We wait bloody ages for him to give us something useful to do, and then he wants it all done yesterday." The gargoyle's grumble was accurate enough. Max would have preferred more time, but Ekstrand hadn't listened to his concerns.

After a few moments of peering out into the grey mists of the Nether the gargoyle said, "Acknowledged. Get the stick ready. I hope Ekstrand realises that it's his fault if this doesn't work."

Max pulled it out of the pocket of his raincoat. The rod looked like it was made of smoky quartz tipped with copper, and was covered in sorcerous formulae. As Ekstrand had instructed he twisted the top two inches forty-five degrees until the formulae glowed and then thrust it through the floorboards by his feet. It went in as easily as a pin in corkboard and disappeared out of sight, leaving only a neat round hole in the wood.

“What now?” the gargoyle asked.

“We wait.”

A tremor shook the building, making the upturned glasses in the centre of the table rattle against the wood. The gargoyle gripped the stone windowsill with its claws. “He’s not being subtle,” it said. “Look!”

Max followed its stony gaze out the window and saw the mists turning red. Everyone else in the Agency headquarters who’d been woken by the shaking would probably take one look out of the window and—

The door banged open and a man in pyjamas burst into the room, hit the nearest chair and stumbled forwards. He recovered his balance and gripped the chair back as he looked around the room in confusion. The door closed behind him with a slam. Max recognised him as Mr Derne, the head of the Agency.

“What the bloody—” He saw Max sitting at the far side of the conference table and then the gargoyle. “Who are you? What—”

The door opened again and another man—this one pulling a dressing gown over his pyjamas—ran into the room and crashed into the first. There was a burst of swearing and exclamations when a woman and a third and fourth man arrived in the same manner.

“That’s all of them,” Max said to the gargoyle, which signalled with the curtains again.

The movement distracted them and the group quietened.

“What’s going on?” one of the men asked.

There was the sound of shouting in the room above and someone beating on a door. The woman glanced up and then at the other men who had come into the room. She looked older than most of the puppets allowed their wives to look. It had been a while since Max had been in a room with a woman who had a few grey hairs. Max had been given the chance to carry

out only a few days' surveillance, but during that time he'd heard Derne call her Matty when they were alone. Max guessed her name to be Matilda.

"We've been compromised," she said. "I ran out of my room straight into this one and I suppose you all did too. A Sorcerer has found us."

"Shit." One of the men frowned at Max. "You're an Arbiter, aren't you?"

Max nodded. "And you're the ones who run the Agency. Feel free to sit down."

None of them did. Max kept his attention on the one he'd identified as the boss. He'd recovered faster than the other men but he wasn't as calm as the woman. She was one to watch too. It wasn't clear exactly where she was in the hierarchy but she was one of the most trusted of the inner circle.

For the past week, Max had been watching three rooms, including the one they sat in, using the same scrying beetles Ekstrand had sent into the Chapter building to see what happened to those within. He would have preferred an opportunity to thoroughly brief Ekstrand before coming through but the Sorcerer had been unavailable. Petra had said it was because he was at war with the Sorcerer of Mercia, which was clearly demanding, but Max agreed with the gargoyle's appraisal: Ekstrand was actually only remotely useful one day a week. As they'd arranged outside, the gargoyle sat behind Derne to identify him for Ekstrand.

"How dare you break in?" Derne said. "How dare—"

He stopped when a burning line described a doorway in the stone wall and a Way opened out onto the Nether. Mr Ekstrand strode through, wearing his black suit, cape and top hat. As it had been when speaking with the puppet and at the Rosa party in Aquae Sulis, his face was obscured. He pointed at the group with the silver tip of his cane as the doorway returned to stone behind him. "Sit down."

They complied.

“I am the Sorcerer Guardian of Wessex and now the owner of this Agency and the information contained within its walls. Operations will continue as they always have, but I will be informed of all decisions made outside of the day-to-day running, and will veto any I disagree with.”

“You will not,” Derne said. “We’re outside of the Heptarchy and a long way from your domain. You have no right to do this whatsoever.”

Ekstrand smiled. “As you so rightly point out, you are outside of the Heptarchy and indeed outside any recognised domain. Therefore you have no protection from any third party so I can do as I please. I don’t care if this upsets you and I have no interest in what you may think your rights are. You are parasites, living off the Fae’s puppets, and have no moral high ground to speak of.”

“And what if I refuse?”

“Mr Derne,” Ekstrand sighed. “I understand that you and your employees use Fae magic here on a daily basis. I am quite certain the Fae are unaware of how you profit from this, and indeed how you profit from their own puppets without any tithe paid. It’s a common courtesy you’ve failed to extend to them. I’m sure they would be fascinated to learn of your existence. If you have no interest in working for me then I will simply open a Way to the Royal Court in Exilium and introduce you to the King and Queen personally.”

Derne opened his mouth to speak but the tallest man leaned across the table. “Better to deal with a Sorcerer than a Fae, Geoffrey.”

Derne looked at Matilda who met his gaze and nodded slowly. “He’s right. You need to discuss terms.”

“Those are simple,” Ekstrand said. “I have no interest in money so you don’t have to worry about that. I just want access to all of the files on the

puppets you hold here and to have any questions answered."

"For now," Derne replied.

"Yes, for now," Ekstrand nodded. "I may want more in the future but I can be certain I'll never want a share in your profits."

"It can't be that simple," the woman said.

"I've already made a slight alteration to your foundations," Ekstrand said. His words sparked an exchange of nervous glances between those sitting at the table. "I will know who goes in and out, and when. If you contact any third parties to appeal for help, I'll destroy this building and deliver you all to the Fae. So it's quite simple really."

"It could be a lot worse," the woman said to Derne.

"I could have killed you all as you slept," Ekstrand agreed. "But you'll be so much more useful alive."

Derne gave a heavy sigh. Max knew he wasn't going to argue any more but he was far from cowed. He'd expected them to be terrified and wondered why they were so ready to accept the terms. He hoped Ekstrand's "slight alterations" were enough. They needed a Chapter to keep a constant watch, not a single Arbiter and gargoyle. And there were other things that needed attention, not the least of which was the war with Mercia and the murder of most of the Sorcerers of the Heptarchy. London's corrupt Chapter was still on his mind, too.

"Now, I have a question for you," Ekstrand said. "Where are the anchors for the building?"

"You want to know why there isn't an anchor property in Mundanus," Derne replied. "It's easier to show you."

Cathy was still half asleep when the glass was brought to her lips but the pungent smell of aniseed was enough to make her groan. “What is this stuff?”

“Medicine,” the nurse said. “Drink it all up now.”

She obeyed, used to being given potions to ease pain and draughts to help her sleep. The ointment that had been rubbed into her hands smelt of Lord Poppy’s magic and had made her retch the first time it was applied. Now the wounds in her hands left by the thorns she’d pulled from Sophia’s neck were nothing more than pale red marks and they would fade over time.

She couldn’t remember most of the days since the attack. She had confused memories of the mundane hospital and none whatsoever of how she got home again. Sometimes she thought she remembered Will being there but then suspected those were dreams. She knew the nurse had been using Charms to keep her sleepy—it was common practice in the Nether, when one was injured or very ill—but that morning had been the first when her head had felt clear.

Today’s medicine was the most foul tasting she’d had to date and burned her throat as it went down. It made her cough, which caused the wounds in her chest to hurt, and she tried her best to stop. For a few minutes all she could do was let herself sink into the pile of pillows and catch her breath.

There was someone in the room with her; even with her eyes closed she could sense it. Hoping it was Will instead of the nurse, she opened her eyes and saw a man standing at the end of the bed. The nurse had left.

He wasn’t her husband and he wasn’t Fae; that was something at least. It took a moment to place him.

It was the man from the Agency she’d shocked with her determination not to be conned. “Mr Bennet?” Had he found the bug she’d planted on him

for the Arbiter? But that was weeks ago.

“Mrs Reticulata-Iris,” he replied, but there was something in the way he said it that made her nervous. That and the fact he was in her bedroom. A folder was tucked under his arm.

“Why…What are you doing in my room?”

“I wanted to speak with you in private.”

The adrenalin was helping her now and she struggled to sit up straighter. “Surely you understand I’m not receiving visitors. If there’s something urgent to discuss then talk to the Steward.”

“That wouldn’t be appropriate,” he replied, now standing beside her. His chin was just as nonexistent as before, but she didn’t remember his eyes being so narrow and hate-filled.

She was dressed in only a nightgown, high enough in the neck to cover her wounds and dressings, but not substantial enough to make her feel comfortable in his presence. She pulled the sheets up higher. “Your being in this room is not appropriate. Please leave.”

“Our business won’t take long. A great deal has changed since we last spoke. I know all about you now.”

The medicine was still burning; it felt like it was fizzing in her stomach and threatening to come back up again. “I don’t know—”

He leaned over her, making her press back into the pillows. “I know about your time in Mundanus, your love affair and your betrayal of your family. I know who you called on your mobile phone before the attack, your personal bank account details and that you still keep the flat in Manchester for when you plan to escape. Everything.”

Her heart was pounding so hard against her ribs Cathy feared it would open the wounds again. She tried to think of something to say, some way to wipe the sickening look from his face, but there was nothing except panic.

“I’m certain you wouldn’t want Dame Iris to know of such things,” Bennet said. “I know how traditional she is, and how difficult to please. A simple matter of paying me one hundred thousand of the Queen’s pounds would ensure she would never know.”

“You’re blackmailing me?”

He smiled. “I’m proposing an exchange of money in return for a crucial service. It’s not a huge amount. It is, in fact, exactly what you deducted from my original estimate of your estate costs for the year. Isn’t that fortuitous? It makes it so much easier for me to explain away the amount in a revised bill and it gives you the convenience of merely having to sign this piece of paper to authorise the transfer of funds to correct an administrative error.”

“If you think I’m going to—”

“I think you’re going to sign, Mrs Iris,” he opened the file and pulled out an invoice with an authorisation of payment. He pulled a pen from the inside of his jacket. “I think your husband’s wealth makes this a trifling amount of money to pay for peace of mind and the preservation of your lifestyle. And I think the curse will stop you from telling anybody about this.”

As he spoke, the burning spread up from her stomach into her chest. The medicine! He nodded and looked at the glass. “Yes. The nurse didn’t know, for what it’s worth. You’ll never be able to seek the antidote if you can’t speak or write about it and I can assure you, a generic Curse Lifter won’t work against one made specifically for you. So there’s only one thing to do, isn’t there?”

He held out the pen and she took it, fantasising about plunging its nib into the back of his hand. She tried to promise she’d tell Will but even the

act of opening her mouth to do so made her cough so hard she cried out in pain.

“Powerful, isn’t it?” Bennet’s smug grin made her feel murderous. “Just sign and I’ll leave you to rest.”

She considering bolting but she hadn’t been out of bed since the attack, and she wasn’t even sure she’d be able to walk out of the house. And she’d decided to stay and fight. Caving in to his demand didn’t feel like the first step in her new direction. She felt weak and scared and filled with a fury she was unable to express. She couldn’t even think of an insult so she clenched her teeth and signed.

He whipped the paper away into the folder and tucked it under his arm before she’d even had a chance to screw the cap back on the fountain pen.

He turned to go but paused when he reached the door. “I’ll be watching you, Mrs Iris. I would think twice before you speak to anyone in Society about the way the Agency conducts its business.” So he knew she’d told Margritte and Georgiana that the Agency was conning them. “I wish you a speedy recovery,” he said, all fake smiles and good manners again.

I wish you a slow and terrible death, she thought, exhausted. All that remained after he left was the faint scent of aniseed and a bitter rage that burned as much as the potion.

Derne led them down the corridor. Max brought the gargoyle with them, not wanting to leave it there to chat with the Agency directors and give something away.

They passed the main entrance of the building with front doors ten feet high, made of solid oak and reinforced with iron bracers with no arcane design. There were three different locks and a reinforcing crossbar. It

seemed to be designed to repel invading hordes rather than Fae or Sorcerers.

There were no paintings and the decor was functionally minimal. Stone walls, flagstone floors with a narrow carpet runner to muffle footfalls, and nothing else. Max had been inside dozens of Nether properties and was used to matching architectural features on the inside with what he knew of the anchor building. Something wasn't right about the proportions of the one he was walking through now. The windows in the main administrative room, the one in which he and the gargoyle had found the file on Miss Rainer and the rogue Rosas, had windows of Georgian proportions out of keeping with the thick medieval walls and relatively small footprint of the mundane foundations he'd found with the tracker.

The main staircase came into view, also made of stout oak. The banging and shouting from the staff trapped in their rooms echoed down the wide stairwell but less than when the building had been shaking. Max estimated there were about fifty staff that never left the building from day to day and another twenty who dealt directly with the puppets. He hadn't been able to watch all the floors, though, and there were four storeys above them which could be filled with other staff for all he knew.

Derne walked past the staircase and down the corridor of the opposite wing until he reached a heavily fortified door with a sliding panel at eye height. He knocked three times rapidly, then added a fourth knock after three seconds. The panel slid open straight away.

"Mr Derne!" A male voice on the other side of the door accompanied a pair of eyes looking through the slot. "What happened? Is everything—"

"Let me in," Derne said. "There are people with me…from outside. Switch off the secondary defences and don't attack them."

"Are you—"

“Just do it,” Derne snapped.

A scraping of bolts and the tumble of several large locks filled the hallway. The door opened and Derne beckoned them through. There was a narrow staircase leading down, lit by oil lanterns at regular intervals. The guard stood in the corner, holding the door open and watching them with wide eyes as they passed.

“What are the secondary defences?” Ekstrand asked as they descended the stone steps.

Derne pointed up with his index finger without looking. “See the holes in the ceiling? Darts tipped with curare are fired out of them if a person walks down these steps in the wrong way.”

“Blimey,” the gargoyle whispered.

Max looked at the holes and then watched Derne more closely. He was following a pattern of placing his foot on certain parts of each step. Max put a hand on Ekstrand’s shoulder to stop him. “Derne, you’re still walking like the defences are active.”

“Habit,” Derne replied but Max sent the gargoyle ahead as a precaution. No darts were fired and he released Ekstrand’s shoulder. Going down the stairs made his leg ache and he leaned more heavily on the walking stick but he eventually made it to the bottom without incident.

There was another fortified door and a similar conversation with another guard through a slot. The stone floor was less even and the walls were made of the same stones as the mundane foundations. They were in the only part of the building truly reflected in the Nether.

“Before we go in, I must ask you to be quiet. You’ll need to put on a hooded cloak and move slowly.” He frowned at the gargoyle. “That…thing can’t come in.”

“Best you stay out here and keep watch,” Max said to it. He didn’t want all of them to be on the other side of the doors, even though they were with Ekstrand. The Agency was using magic beyond sorcerous knowledge and there was every possibility Derne was leading them into a trap.

The gargoyle took up a position outside the door, sitting on its haunches and leaning forwards as if perched on top of a cathedral.

On the other side of the second door was a small chamber with several grey cloaks hung on a row of pegs, a table and chair for the guard, and another door, less fortified. The guard wore a holster with a semiautomatic pistol still tucked in it, something Max had never seen in the Nether. The puppets shunned modern weapons; for them anything more advanced than a flintlock was seen as uncouth. The guard held his hand a couple of inches above it.

“Don’t touch that,” Max said, and Ekstrand noticed the weapon.

“Or I’ll extract all the water from your body,” the Sorcerer added.

Whilst the threat did make the guard look nervous he didn’t stand down until he had a nod from Derne. They were well trained and loyal. They had to be, for the Agency to have stayed secret for so long. Max wondered how Derne elicited such loyalty.

Derne put on one of the grey cloaks and handed another to Ekstrand. He stared at Ekstrand’s top hat when the Sorcerer held it out to him and, not taking the hint, pointed at a hook on the wall. Max collected a cloak for himself and checked it inside and out before draping it around his shoulders. There was a hook-and-eye at the neck to hold it in place and a generous hood, not unlike that worn by mundane monks.

“Remember, move slowly, and once we’re through that door you mustn’t speak. No doubt you’ll have questions. Save them for when we’re back in this room.”

Ekstrand gave a curt nod and all three of them put up the hoods. The third door was opened and Max saw it was thick enough to be soundproof.

They were led into a large room with a low ceiling, a space Max suspected was once the cellars—and possibly dungeons—of the former castle but with all the dividing walls removed to make one space. The air was stuffy and thick with the scent of flowers that irritated the back of Max's throat. There were thick columns of stones at intervals to bear the weight of the building above but little else Max saw made sense.

About fifty or so men and women were seated around the room, strapped into wooden chairs. They weren't straining against the bonds, rather it looked like they were being held in, as all were slumped and slack faced. The chairs were positioned in small groups around tables brightly lit from above by lanterns which left the rest of the room in shadow. On the tables were models of different parts of the building. Some featured the whole structure, others individual floors. The people strapped into the chairs were staring at the models and nothing else.

A movement drew his attention to a person on the far side of the room, dressed in the same grey robes as they'd been given, moving very slowly towards one of the men in a nearby chair. Drool was wiped from the chin of the slack-faced man who didn't seem to notice.

Ekstrand walked slowly around the room, inspecting the models and the seated people. Max saw three other people wearing robes, all tending to various needs. When he saw one lingering behind one of the chairs he too went further in and looked more closely at the nearest chair. Its high back also formed a sort of cupboard in which an IV bag was hung at the top and another bag lower down collected urine. The woman in the chair was so pale he wondered if she'd ever left the Nether since reaching adulthood.

The model on the table was a perfect replica of the exterior of the Nether building down to every detail, including slight imperfections in the individual stone blocks. Max stooped a little to try and get an idea of what the woman could see as she stared at it. When he straightened back up again he looked at the man seated opposite her. Something about his nose caught Max's eye and he seemed familiar. He was thinner, paler and his hair had been shaved off, but Max was certain it was Horatio Gallica-Rosa, the one who'd tried to pass off Lavandula's secret house as his own.

So that was what happened to the Roses.

Max had a sudden awareness of the gargoyle on the other side of the door, ready to pounce on the guard. It was time to leave. Ekstrand had seen enough too and they both headed for the door, Derne close behind the Sorcerer.

The gargoyle was staring at the guard, who was standing in front of the door and had to be pushed aside by Ekstrand. The gargoyle's teeth were bared and its head was low and shoulders high. Derne closed the door and ushered them towards the exit but the gargoyle headed for Max.

"We have to go back in there," it growled. "We have to stop this."

"Not an option," Max replied and took off the robe. "If the building collapsed or stopped existing it would kill all the people here or, at best, they'd be lost in the Nether."

A low rumbling percolated in its throat. "We can't ignore it."

"We need to go, sir," Max said to Ekstrand.

"Not yet, I have questions. Derne, those people in there, *they* are the anchors, aren't they?"

Derne nodded, his eyes darting to the gargoyle and back to the Sorcerer. "Yes. It's a form of wish magic altered for our purpose." He glanced at the

gargoyle again. “They collectively wish the building into existence in the Nether, and the mundane foundations are enough to hold it in place.”

“Ingenious,” Ekstrand commented.

“Ingenious!” The gargoyle focused on Ekstrand. “Are you—”

“I’ll take it upstairs,” Max said and headed for the door. “Come on,” he said to the gargoyle.

“I won’t be long,” Ekstrand said. “Now, tell me, how do they maintain their concentration?”

Max didn’t hear the answer as he started up the stairs. The gargoyle followed him, muttering to itself all the way. When they were back in the hallway upstairs it prowled up and down as they waited for Ekstrand.

“Wait till we get back to his house,” Max said when the gargoyle opened its mouth to speak. “Not here.”

Max leaned against the wall. He was tired and his leg ached. His thoughts kept returning to the sight of the Gallica-Rosa in the basement. He’d only seen him briefly in the ballroom after he’d rescued the Master of Ceremonies and hadn’t given any more thought to what had happened to the family other than where he could find them for interrogation.

“That code in his file must have something to do with it,” the gargoyle said. “We need to ask them what it all means.”

“They’ll tell us now,” Max replied.

“If I had a stomach I’d be throwing up,” the gargoyle added. “This is—”

“Wait until we get back,” Max said, and the gargoyle went back to its prowling.

Ekstrand took longer than he said he would but Max had anticipated that. He emerged from the doorway down to the basement with Derne. “That’s everything for now,” he said.

“Sir, there’s a code in Horatio Gallica-Rosa’s file,” Max said. “We need to know what it means.”

“Write that up, will you?” Ekstrand said to Derne. “Max will collect it soon.”

Derne sucked in a deep breath through his nostrils and then nodded.

Ekstrand moved to the edge of the carpet runner and tapped on the flagstone floor with the tip of his cane. “The doors will open again in one minute. I’m leaving now but remember, I’m watching you.”

“I doubt I can forget it,” Derne replied.

Ekstrand opened a way into the Nether and, when they stepped through, the building was a hundred yards away. Ekstrand looked at it for a few moments and then opened a Way to the hallway of his house. The moment they were through and the Way closed behind them, the gargoyle rounded on the Sorcerer.

“So when are you going to shut the Agency down?”

“Why in the Worlds would I do that?” Ekstrand asked as he took off his hat.

“Because of the people in the basement.”

“What about them?”

The gargoyle didn’t answer immediately; it just stared at Ekstrand with its stone marble eyes. “You don’t give a flying buttress about those poor bastards, do you?”

“Mr Ekstrand.” Petra’s voice cut cleanly through the gargoyle’s outrage. “I’ve finished the last autopsy and there’s something you need to know.”

Max glanced at the clock. It was three in the morning and she looked exhausted. “About the Sorcerer of Essex?” He knew Dante was the last one to be autopsied of the dead Sorcerers.

Petra nodded. “Yes, Dante. Sir, his heart was turned into stone too, just like the other Sorcerers and the people in the Bath Chapter. But Dante was different; that didn’t kill him.”

“I beg your pardon?” Ekstrand was now focused fully on her.

“His heart being turned to stone didn’t kill him because he was already dead.”

2

“This is it.”

Will peered out of the taxi window at the terraced mundane house. It lacked any of the beauty and majesty of Bath’s splendid architecture. He asked the driver to wait and got out. Although the prospect of enduring the terrible smell of the mundane car once again didn’t appeal, it was less troublesome than having to find another in the rain. The driver nodded and parked whilst opening a packet of crisps with his teeth at the same time. That explained the beefy tang to the taxi’s smell but not the odour of rotten eggs.

He walked to the gate and had a moment of doubt. Should he have brought his armed footmen? Was this a good idea at all? He frowned at the thought of being so crass. He might be Duke of Londinium now but it didn’t mean he couldn’t take care of a personal matter alone and in the way he saw fit.

He’d spent days at Cathy’s bedside, racked with guilt about the stabbing and endlessly ruminating upon the scant information he’d been given after the attack, only to discover how much she’d been hiding from him. The man from the Agency had delivered the dossier on his wife’s secret life four days earlier. It detailed a flat she rented in the dark city of Manchester—the only city in England without a single Nether property, or so he’d been told. She’d even attended university there.

The dossier created more questions than it answered. It listed, amongst other items, the mobile phone that she’d used to call the man who saved her

from the assassin. Quite how she'd struck up a relationship with a dull computer programmer from Bath wasn't forthcoming, but he had to make sure that, however it had started, it was going to stop now. He pushed the gate open.

Two of the tiles on the doorstep were cracked and there were weeds poking their way through the path. Beer cans and fast food cartons were banked against the inside of the garden wall like a snow drift made of urban decay. He pushed the doorbell, expecting nothing to happen, but it actually worked.

He waited just long enough to wonder whether anyone was in before seeing a shape move on the other side of the dappled glass in the front door. It was opened by a very mundane man, dressed in black trousers and a white shirt. He was holding a black tie in his hand and the collar of his shirt was turned up as if he were about to put the tie on. Will noted his stubble, the dark shadows beneath his eyes, the brown hair that hadn't felt a comb for a couple of days. His face was familiar but Will couldn't place where he'd seen him.

"Hello?"

"Are you Sam? Samuel Westonville?"

The mundane scratched his chin. It sounded like he was sanding wood. "Maybe. Who are you?"

"I'm Catherine's husband."

The mundane's mouth dropped open. "Oh, right. Yeah, I'm Sam. Come in. How is she?"

"Recovering," Will said, relieved that the house wasn't the hovel he expected on the inside, but the air smelt stale and there was a pile of unopened post to the side of the door. Some of the envelopes had footprints on them.

“I can offer you coffee but there’s no milk. No milk that’s safe to drink anyway.”

“No, thank you.”

Sam led him to a small living room filled with boxes. “Sorry about the mess.” He tossed the tie on the arm of a chair and lifted a box off the sofa. He gestured for Will to sit down, which Will ignored.

“I won’t keep you long. I wanted to know why you were in the park with my wife.”

Sam scratched the back of his head and looked uncomfortable. “She… Look, there isn’t anything going on between us, you do know that, don’t you?”

“But why were you there when she was attacked?”

“Well, I was just passing by.” He was a terrible liar.

“After she phoned you.”

“Um, yeah. Look, there’s nothing dodgy going on. Haven’t you asked her?”

“She’s barely been conscious since the attack, that’s why I’m asking you.”

“I met her when everyone was looking for her uncle, do you know about that? It was before she was…um, before you were married.”

“Yes, I know all about that. Go on.”

“She helped me get a memory back and that helped the…people looking for her uncle to find him.”

Will suddenly knew where he’d seen him before. It was in the ballroom at Horatio Gallica-Rosa’s failed housewarming. He was with the Sorcerer and the Arbiter. “You know the Sorcerer Guardian of Wessex?”

“Yeah, he was the one who introduced me to Cathy.”

“And…”

“And…that’s all,” Sam said, his hand sliding down the back of his head to rub the back of his neck. “You sure you don’t want a drink?”

Will wanted a glass of the best single malt at Black’s, not anything that might be tucked away in a mundane’s house. His jealousy about a possible affair was fading the more the mundane spoke; he was too mediocre to be a lover worthy of concern. However, the connection to the Sorcerer of Wessex was worrying. Why would Cathy maintain a friendship with this man if not to maintain a connection to the Sorcerer? And why else would she do that, other than if she was going to run away again? That was why she was in the park; that was why she still had her old flat, her bank account, her old life in Mundanus. She was still planning to go back to it. She was going to leave him.

“Why did she phone you?”

“To see if I was OK. Look, Cathy knew me and my wife were having problems—”

“You’re married?”

“Was. She died.”

“Oh. My condolences.”

“Yeah…she was still alive when Cathy was at the park. She wanted to know if I was OK and I wasn’t so she offered a friendly ear.”

“So you weren’t just passing by. You were at the park to meet her, in secret.”

“There was nothing dodgy about it, though.”

“Then why lie? Why say you were just passing?”

“Because I knew you’d think the worst, OK? Cathy wouldn’t do anything with me, it’s not like that between us, we’re friends.”

“My wife is the most important woman in Londinium.” Will kept his voice calm and low. “You are nothing more than a mundane with a talent

for getting yourself tangled up in things you should not. Catherine is not your friend and you will not see her again."

"Now just wait a minute." Sam's voice rose. "I saved her life! And it's not up to you to decide who is her friend or not, it's up to her."

"Perhaps I'm not making myself clear enough for your limited capabilities. Stay away from my wife."

"I don't know who the fuck you think you are, coming into my house and—"

Will felt for the scabbard of his rapier, glamoured to be invisible to mundane eyes, and drew the sword in one motion. The Charm was broken and Sam yelped at the sight of him drawing the weapon seemingly out of thin air. Will held the sword perfectly still and straight with its point pressed lightly against the mundane's throat.

"I am the Duke of Londinium, a Reticulata-Iris and the man responsible for my wife's honour. Now before you force me to be any more impolite I will leave you with a message you may better understand." He leaned forwards and increased the pressure fractionally. "Don't fuck with me or my family or I will kill you."

Margritte lifted her heavy black taffeta skirts as she ascended the staircase to her son's study. The Wesley room, made famous by one of the mundane alumnae, was one of her favourites in Lincoln College but today the memories of the times she and Bartholomew had spent there were not welcome. She had cried enough. Now it was time to do something about the crime committed against her family.

She knocked on the door and entered when called. Her eldest son was sitting on one of the leather armchairs in the centre of the room, reading.

The walls were covered in dark wood panelling, exquisitely carved, the room lit by the sprites trapped in glass globes at intervals along the walls. She couldn't stop herself looking at the stone fireplace and the small marble bust on it. She remembered Bartholomew showing it to her for the first time and how they had kissed in front of it.

"I'll be with you in a moment, Mother," Alexander said.

She forced herself to breathe again after looking over at him. From behind, he looked too much like his father: his hair just the same shade of dark brown, tied back with the same small black ribbon her husband favoured. She clutched at the locket hanging over her bodice, thought of the lock of her husband's hair within and marvelled at how yet more tears were ready to come.

"I do apologise," Alexander said, positioning his bookmark carefully before getting up to come to her. "Did you manage to sleep any better?"

"Not really," she said and they kissed each other's cheeks three times in the Dutch fashion. She doubted she would ever sleep well again. How could she lie in bed alone and drift off after spending over two hundred years of nights with the man she loved curled around her? She'd have to visit the Shopkeeper soon and buy a Charm to give her some rest.

"Are you happy with your room? It's one of the best in the college. Or would you prefer another? I'm sure it can be arranged." When she didn't reply immediately he twisted one of his cufflinks. "Or do you plan to go back to Hampton Court? Father provided most generously for you in the will. You don't need to worry about a thing. I'm more than happy for you to live at Hampton even though I own it now. For as long as you wish, I have no desire to—"

"Alexander." She held up her hand and seated herself opposite him. "Darling, that's not what I want to discuss. We need to talk about the

Londinium throne."

He leaned back in the chair, laced his fingers in front of him. "Is there anything to talk about?"

"Yes! We can't just ignore what happened. Your father was accused, judged, murdered and now remembered for a crime he didn't commit."

He squirmed, looking away. "I know."

"And it isn't just the fact that the throne was taken from him in such an offensive way, it's the fact that it was an Iris who took it. They destroyed our influence on the mundane royal line and then, when we finally achieve our rightful place in Society, they take power from us again."

"Father always said we needed to put that behind us."

"Your father didn't know the depths the Irises would sink to."

"But he did know what it did to my grandfather," Alexander replied, now looking at her. "He said feuds between families did nothing but tear people apart as well as Society. He knew that better than anyone."

Margritte sighed, remembering the last time she'd seen her father-in-law. He was a broken man, drunk and mostly mad, hidden away by the family before he drank himself to death. Once the Earl of Oxford, one of Queen Anne's most important politicians, destroyed along with her and her reign by the Iris curse. "Your father was a sensitive, noble and patient man. He waited over a hundred years for his time to come and then it was stolen from him in moments. Can you rest knowing your father was murdered by an Iris—nothing more than an arrogant child with his patron pulling the strings?"

Alexander took a breath to say something, reconsidered and instead reached across to pull the cord next to the fire twice. "I remember when I used to get upset about things, Father always used to remind me to look at the bigger picture."

Margritte controlled a flash of rage. “I’m not a child, Alexander.”

“But there *is* a bigger picture to consider. You’re speaking as though you want to take revenge—”

“Not revenge, I want to take back the throne that was stolen from your father.”

“Regardless,” Alexander said, “that’s tantamount to war. Is that what you want?”

“I didn’t march into the Court accusing a decent man of terrible things! I didn’t murder him and steal his Dukedom! I didn’t ask for this war but if that’s what it takes to restore to us what is rightfully ours—and has been for hundreds of years—then so be it!”

Alexander paled. “Mother, you’re grieving, you’re not—”

“You are avoiding facing up to your responsibility.”

“Which is?”

“To help me clear your father’s name and take back the Dukedom.”

“You want me to be Duke?”

“It’s your birthright.”

There was a knock at the door and Alexander called in the butler, who had tea, sandwiches and cakes ready to serve. Margritte seethed as the tea was poured. Her son had been left in his ivory tower too long.

Once the butler had left and he’d taken a rather audible gulp of tea, Alexander said, “Mother, I’m no Duke, I’m a professor and the Vice-Chancellor of Oxenford! I can’t just abandon my responsibilities here. And I’m sorry, but I can’t share your opinion on the way to proceed. Starting a war with the Irises would be…foolish.”

“You think I’m a grief-stricken fool?”

“I think you’re making decisions whilst traumatised. I couldn’t possibly sanction a war with the Irises; there are many who live in Oxenford. They

hold three colleges here, and, after the terrible disruption to the university caused by the fall of the Roses, I couldn't possibly see how a war would be supported by my peers or the Chancellor."

"Damn the Chancellor! He isn't one of us!"

"Mother—" Alexander made no effort to hide how appalled he was "—I cannot risk the stability of Oxenford just because you cannot manage your grief."

She stood up so quickly she knocked the tea cup onto the floor. "How dare you dismiss my loyalty to our family as a weak woman's grief. I suggest you think very carefully about where your loyalties lie."

"Where are you going?" he asked as she turned her back on him and stepped over the broken porcelain.

"To speak to the Patroon. I'm curious to see whether he thinks our family's honour is less important than the comfort of a Sorcerer and his pet academics."

3

Sam looked at the people filling the crematorium's chapel. He didn't recognise most of them. Some of the women were crying, all dressed in the same kind of corporate gear Leanne used to wear, only black. Their grieving made him aware of his own hollow detachment. He felt nothing except the sharp awareness of the man who'd killed her sitting three rows behind him. Bastard.

"I would like to speak at the funeral," Neugent had said in a letter redirected from his house in Bath to Lord Iron's vast estate in Lancashire. "I worked very closely with Leanne for several years and had the utmost respect and admiration for her."

Sam had burnt the letter and stood at the window, looking out over landscaped gardens, wondering what the fuck was happening to his life. Lord Iron had dined with him the night he arrived; they'd talked about Leanne mostly, then he'd been called away on business. "Stay, relax, grieve," Iron said as he shook his hand. "Treat this as your own house. The staff will provide everything you need. I'll be back for the funeral."

He'd watched the limousine crawl down the drive, listened to the crackle of the gravel beneath its tyres and thought of the last time he saw his wife. It was all he seemed capable of thinking about.

The funeral had been delayed by the recovery from his own injuries and by the autopsy, which gave a simple (and incorrect) conclusion: natural causes. A blood vessel had burst in her brain and then she dropped dead.

The report detailed that she was slightly underweight but otherwise in good health.

Several nights in a row he dreamt of her on the underground platform. In one dream they held hands waiting for the train together. He'd woken up crying but soon sank back into the numbness that endured throughout the funeral arrangements. He'd left most of the details to her parents. His mother-in-law seemed to think the choice of flowers was far more important than he ever could. Her parents didn't seem to know about the separation, and, from the way most of the people there were looking at him, he didn't think they did either. At least she'd been discreet about it. But that was Leanne: professional to the last. She wouldn't have taken all her problems to work with her. She just left them behind in Bath.

He took care not to look at Neugent and faced forwards again, unable to stop his gaze drifting towards the coffin. Sam could still feel the pressure of it on his shoulder. He wondered if his skin would ever forget the feeling of carrying his dead wife in a heavy box. He tried to imagine her body lying inside it, cut and stitched up again. He could just as easily imagine it filled with sand or with dozens of dolls or old mobile phones. Each set of imagined contents became more fantastical; all lacked any emotional impact.

The worry that Lord Poppy would do something to wreck it all or pull him away plagued him, but he hadn't heard from him or the faerie since he delivered Cathy's painting. Perhaps Poppy had forgotten about him.

"She was so young," his mother-in-law said.

She was sat next to him and Leanne's father was sitting on the other side with an arm around her. He too was staring at the coffin. Sam realised it was the longest time he'd actually sat with Leanne's parents. He'd barely made an impression in their life. His parents were in Australia. They'd

offered to come but he told them not to worry about it. They'd never liked Leanne. It would have been awkward. His mum would only have baked two dozen cakes and urged him to talk about his feelings every five minutes. He didn't have the stomach for either, nor for the way his father would have wittered on about his stamp collection to anyone he could corner.

Leanne's mother glanced at him, perhaps waiting for a response to her comment but Sam said nothing. There were no words in him.

They shared the front row with the pallbearers. Aside from him and her father they were made up of cousins and uncles, some of whom he'd never met. They weren't a close family and many of them hadn't even been to the wedding. He was sitting in a room full of strangers at his wife's funeral. As he tried to look anywhere but at the coffin he caught glimpses of people trying to point him out discreetly during whispered conversations. It made him feel like an exhibit at some grotesque circus.

The man from the crematorium started the ceremony. It was non-religious, according to Leanne's wishes, and bland. He finally stopped worrying that Poppy would find some way to interfere with it.

Then it was his turn to speak. The paper was crumpled and soft in his hand. He couldn't even remember what he'd written on it. Sam walked up to the podium, decorated with flowers lovingly chosen by another woman he didn't really know, and looked out over the congregation. Lord Iron was sitting at the back, looking straight at him. He inclined his head towards Sam. What do you want with me? Sam pushed the thought aside and looked down at the paper.

"Thank you for coming," he started. His voice was too quiet and he leaned closer to the microphone. "I'm Sam, Leanne's husband. I don't know many of you, I'm assuming you know Leanne from work. She was…very dedicated and ambitious. In many ways you could say she was the exact

opposite to me.” His awkward smile was reflected back at him from dozens of faces. “It didn’t used to be that way. In university we were…happy.” He felt a crackle in his voice and looked back down at the piece of paper but it was covered in gibberish. “Something changed. I suppose that’s what happens, I think Leanne was better at growing up than I was. She became something…amazing, she had so much energy and she was fearless.” People were nodding now. People who knew her better than he did. “I can’t help but feel stupid when I think about her. I thought we’d have longer together, but people always do, don’t they? We’re all on a clock. We’re all going to die. That’s why we’re all here—not just because of Leanne but because we know it’s going to happen to us and we’re scared and we want to be with other people who are scared too. Leanne should be here and I should be in that box. That’s the way I see it. She had more to give.”

His throat felt like it was closing up and his head began to throb. He crushed the piece of paper in his fist and left the podium. For a moment he almost left the chapel, but his mother-in-law was reaching a hand towards him, all tears and neediness. Even though it repelled him, he went to sit next to her and embraced her as Leanne’s father went up to speak.

Sam didn’t hear a single word he said.

A knock on the door woke Cathy from dreams of the butler, Morgan, speaking to her about afternoon tea with Bennet’s voice and pouring the poisonous liquid curse from the teapot. As the nurse opened the door she glanced to her bedside and saw the glass was gone, along with any outward traces of what Bennet had done. Had she dreamt it?

Will walked in and the nurse curtsied. His cheeks were pink and there were tiny drops of water caught in his hair. He smiled at her and she

returned it. The Charm-addled dreams about him hadn't focused on how handsome he was. Seeing him fresh-faced and happy brought back other memories too, ones that made her heart thrum.

"My love," he said and came over to kiss her, sending the nurse scuttling into a corner to busy herself. "How are you feeling?"

"Ready to get up," she said firmly. "Have you been out riding?"

There was a moment of confusion and then he touched his hair. "Oh, yes…it's raining in Mundanus. Are you sure you're ready? It's only been three weeks."

"Nearly a month," Cathy said and pulled the covers back. "Honestly, Will, if I spend another day in here I'll go mad. I was thinking an hour or two in Mundanus would do me the world of good." She didn't want to go back to the park, but she did want to see greenery again and hear birds singing and feel fresh air on her face.

"The weather is terrible."

"And Her Grace isn't ready to leave her bed yet, if you'll forgive me for intruding," the nurse said.

Cathy frowned at her. "Her Grace"? What an odd thing to call her.

"If Cathy feels she's ready then I respect that," Will said and the nurse retreated. Cathy squeezed his hands, happy to have an ally. "I have a surprise for you." His eyes were even more beautiful when he was excited.

He helped her out of the bed which made her feel awkward and feeble. It was strange to have to think so much about moving, as if her body had got rusty inside and she had to remind it of how it used to move. As much as she didn't want to admit it, the attack had really taken it out of her. Her legs felt so heavy and when she stood the room tilted before Will wrapped an arm about her shoulders. "Are you sure you're ready to go downstairs?"

"Yes, I'm so sick of this room. How's Sophia?"

“She’s fine. She’s with Uncle Vincent.”

The nurse helped her into a robe and slippers and Cathy shuffled out of the room, Will holding her as they walked. She remembered how gentle he was after Lord Iris had cut her wrist and the night they finally consummated the marriage. They’d hardly been together since then and she felt awkward and uncertain of herself. She could remember resolving to stay away from him once her lust had got the better of her, for fear of getting pregnant and making escape more difficult. But now that she was going to stay in the Nether and fight the system, did she still need to do that? Could he become an ally too?

The possibility of falling for her own husband was not something Cathy had anticipated and it made her nervous. She had to stay focused on what she was going to do to make Society change, and the last thing she needed was to be all lovestruck, let alone pregnant. So what if he was handsome and clever and kind? If she fell into the trap of being in love with him she’d never be able to carve out a better life for herself or anyone else.

“You’re looking much better,” he said as they made their way to the stairs. “The very best care was provided, both in Mundanus and by the Agency. I’m told there won’t be any long-term problems.”

“It was bad, wasn’t it?”

He paused to kiss her cheek again. “You almost died. If it hadn’t been for the mundane doctors you wouldn’t be with me now.”

“Are you all right?” she asked and he smiled.

“Just glad we got through this.”

She leaned against him as they walked, and felt exhausted by the time they reached the top of the stairs. She didn’t say anything about Bennet for fear she’d cough and be packed off to bed again. Halfway down she noticed footfalls behind her that seemed too heavy to be the nurse. She glanced

back and saw an unfamiliar man following them down a couple of paces behind. His blond hair was cropped short in a modern, mundane style, his eyes were a dull blue and his neat nose looked too small for his face.

“Who’s that?”

“Someone to keep you safe.”

“What, like a bodyguard?”

“Yes.”

“Is that necessary?”

“Yes.”

“So that man who stabbed me, he’s still out there?”

“No…he’s dead.”

She wondered how he’d died. Did Sam do something? She jolted. Sam! Had he been hurt too? She couldn’t ask Will, otherwise he’d know they’d met and it wasn’t something easily explained away. The sense of the world spinning whilst she’d been tucked up in bed was becoming frightening. What else had happened? “But if he’s dead—”

“You’re still at risk.”

“But the man attacked Sophia, it might be her they were after. I don’t need a—”

“Catherine, this is not up for debate.” They reached the bottom of the stairs. “I didn’t protect you before, I’m not making that mistake again. There’s no way Sophia was the target—no one else knows what she means to me.” He stroked her cheek tenderly. “But they know how much you do.”

Cathy tried hard not to lose her thoughts to the messy soup of emotions his tenderness elicited. There was no way he could love her, he was just trying to be a good husband. She was too tired to argue about the bodyguard; that would have to wait.

“Now, I don’t want you to worry about a thing.” Will helped her to walk again. “I’ve been working on something whilst you’ve been recovering and I think it will make you feel much better.”

He guided her down the hallway, past his study and the red drawing room, to the chamber they’d originally allocated as a smaller dining room for intimate dinners. He pulled a key threaded onto a blue silk ribbon out of his pocket and unlocked the door. “This is yours,” he said, placing it in the palm of her hand. “Close your eyes.” She did so and he opened the door. He guided her a few steps in, instructed the bodyguard to stay outside and then closed the door. “You can look now.”

The room had been transformed into a library. She turned in a full circle, taking in the shelves of books. There was a pair of high-backed leather chairs and footstools, one either side of the fireplace, each with a small table next to it. A cheval mirror stood in the corner, covered in blue silk and facing one of the bookshelves rather than into the room. She looked down at the key and then at Will. “You made a library for me?” She felt a rush of blood to her cheeks and chest. It was the thing she had wanted most as a child and the desire had never left her.

“It’s yours. No one else may enter without your explicit permission.”

One of the book spines caught her eye. “Hang on,” she said, moving closer. “That’s a Ray Bradbury and that’s…” She fell silent as she scanned the shelves. “It’s all science-fiction!”

“Every science-fiction novel ever published, to my knowledge. Or rather that of the expert I hired to curate the collection. Where possible I bought first editions. Some are quite rare, I’m given to understand.”

“But that would be thousands of books.” Cathy scanned the shelves. There wasn’t enough room.

Will pulled the silk off the mirror with a dramatic flourish. “Come and look at this.” He waved her over to the mirror. “Stand there.”

He moved aside and pointed to a spot in front of it. Cathy looked at the mirror, expecting to see her reflection but instead she saw a bookcase stretching into a point in the distance. Confused, she reached forwards and her hand passed through where the glass should have been, her fingertips brushing against the spine of one of the books.

“The rest of the books are in there,” Will said. “You can step through and walk around it like any other room. It’s a simple matter to add more shelves. I wanted to keep this room cosy.” He covered the mirror with the silk again.

Cathy stared at the shelves next to her. “I can’t believe it.”

“Do you like it?”

“Like it?” She laughed and embraced him, not caring about the twinges of pain it caused. They kissed and she felt the warmth of his hands through the robe on her back. “It’s perfect,” she finally said.

“I had two chairs brought in—I hope you don’t mind. I was hoping you could educate me.” She searched for sarcasm in his expression but there was none she could detect. “It seems only right that I devote some time to the things you’re passionate about. This seemed a good place to start.”

“Are you serious?”

“Absolutely. I told you it would be different from your life before. You can read whatever you like here and I won’t ever tell you otherwise.”

She wondered if he’d feel the same about some of the sociopolitical books on her shelves in Manchester. As the surprise and elation subsided the old fears emerged like rocks at low tide. Was it a genuine gesture of kindness, or had Will simply made the perfect birdcage for her? She didn’t

know whether to be suspicious or joyful that he seemed to understand her better than any man in the Nether ever had.

She gave a hesitant smile. “We have a lot to talk about, don’t we?”

He nodded. “I’ll ring for tea and have the fire lit. Come and see how comfortable these chairs are.”

It felt good to rest. Her legs were trembling like she’d run a marathon, not just got out of bed and gone down one flight of stairs. One of the maids came and lit the fire and Cathy wondered what Miss Rainer was doing. Every time she thought of her former governess she felt sick. She couldn’t abandon the most important person in her childhood to the life of a scullery maid. Then she wondered how the maid lighting the fire had come to work for the Agency. She’d been surrounded by servants practically all of her life and never once thought to ask.

Weeks of lying in bed had left her feeling disjointed and disoriented. Now she’d decided to stop running away and actually do something, she needed a plan, and allies. She needed to decide what to tell Will and how to bring it up in conversation with Margritte. Cathy was certain she and Bartholomew were progressive enough to discuss the need for change in Society. Bartholomew must have become Duke whilst she was recovering and they would be the most influential couple in Londinium. They could help her set trends and change minds. She breathed as deeply as she could. Everything was going to change now.

Morgan brought tea and gave a warm smile when he saw her. Once he’d poured the tea and left, Will sat in the chair opposite her.

“I feel terrible about what happened,” he said. “I was warned. I should have protected you and Sophia.”

“Who warned you?”

“Cornelius. He said Tulipa would do anything to take the throne. He was right.”

“Bartholomew?” Cathy shook her head. “That doesn’t sound right. You didn’t accuse him, did you?”

The cup stopped halfway to Will’s lips before being set back down on the saucer. He closed his eyes for a moment, the pink fading from his cheeks. “I challenged him to a duel. I killed him. And I took the throne from him.”

Cathy missed the saucer as she let the cup drop and a little tea spilled onto her robe. “What?”

“I’m the Duke of Londinium. You’re the Duchess, Cathy, just as Lord Iris wanted. You don’t remember me telling you about that?”

“No. It’s the bloody sleeping Charms…they…” She looked at him, trying to imagine him killing Bartholomew, but it had the quality of a silly film in her mind, something utterly unbelievable. Could the same man who was so kind to her, so gentle when she was in distress, be capable of killing their friend? It was as horrifying as it was frightening.

“Don’t look at me like that! He sent a man to murder you.”

“But that was a Rosa. There were thorns, Will, I thought I told you.” She was worried she’d dreamt that.

“You did tell me, and the man *was* a Rosa, but Bartholomew sent him to kill you.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“That’s the truth! Lord Iris and Lord Poppy supported me, I took the throne, it’s done now.”

Cathy focused on her tea cup, unable to look at him. How could this have happened? Bartholomew was a cultured, reasonable man. There was no way he would have done such a thing. How could Will have made such a

mistake? Or was it that he wanted an easy excuse to murder the man between him and the throne? Lord Iris was terrifying; had he driven Will to such desperate measures? She swallowed the lump in her throat. She didn't want to show Will how upset she was. "What about Margritte? Has she stayed in Londinium?"

"I have no idea. I haven't convened a Court. I wanted everything to calm down. I didn't want to sit as the Duke until you were well enough to be sworn in as Duchess."

"Oh, bollocks." Cathy squeezed her eyes shut. "I'm Duchess. I really didn't think that would happen." How in the Worlds would she cope with the Court? She'd planned to persuade the Duchess of Londinium to help her change things, not *be* her! How would she be able to use the position to influence behaviour and engender social change when she couldn't even function in public?

"I'll help you. I know it's a shock. It wasn't ideal, but it was a legitimate way to take the throne."

He seemed too calm. "A legitimate…Don't you feel bad about it?"

"Of course I do! He was the first man I killed. It wasn't…I had to keep reminding myself what he did. Besides, once I was committed, there was nothing else to be done."

"Did he admit guilt?"

He looked into the fire. "No. He said he was innocent, right up to the end."

"This is awful," she whispered. "What will Margritte do now? Will her family look after her?"

"I don't know."

"The house she lived in was Bartholomew's…she'll have nothing now, unless he left it to her, I suppose. My God. I can't believe this has

happened. I liked Bartholomew, I could actually have a conversation with him. And Margritte. There's no way he would have paid someone to kill me. You must have got it wrong."

"It's done now!" Will hit the arm of the chair, the anger bursting out as if she had lanced an emotional boil. "We have to move on."

An awkward silence filled the space between them. She looked at the books but the joy the library had brought her seemed such a frivolity in light of Margritte's loss. As soon as she was able to leave the house she had to find her and make sure she was provided for, although Margritte would probably hate her now.

Will set his cup down and leaned across the gap between them. "I can't do this without you, Cathy."

It was clear he didn't want to talk about the Tulipas any more and Cathy realised she had to focus on moving forwards too. Nothing was going to bring Bartholomew back and somehow she had to live with what had happened. "I'm here," she said. If she was going to stay in the Nether she needed him too. She had no idea what she was going to do about Miss Rainer and the Agency or even where to start when it came to the patriarchal hell of Society, but she did know that Will would be the best ally she could get. And despite her doubts and the shock of what he was evidently capable of, she didn't want him to struggle alone. She knew what that was like.

"There's something I wanted to discuss with you," Will began hesitantly. "I have to choose the next Marquis of Westminster. The current one has too much history with the Rosas."

Cathy dredged up one of the tedious lessons from Dame Iris on the structure of the Londinium Court. The position of Marquis was the second most powerful in the domain and was a critical component of the Duke's

rule. The Marquis was supposed to keep an eye on threats from outside of the domain and keep the Duke informed as well as help defend against them. Of course, in practice most of those threats came from within the Court itself.

“You need someone loyal,” Cathy said. “Someone who isn’t going to use the position to undermine you.”

“Quite,” Will replied. “As you can imagine, there are few men I trust absolutely in Londinium.” He poured them a second cup of tea. “Actually, there’s an added complication. Cornelius gave me a lot of help when we first moved here, explaining who was who and how the social wheels spun here. I did tell him that if he helped me take the throne, I’d make him Marquis.”

“But he doesn’t have any status in Society,” Cathy said. “He doesn’t have any wealth of his own any more, I assume?” He shook his head. “Then you’ll have to tell him the deal’s off.”

“I don’t like breaking promises.”

“Hang on, you said you took the throne from Bartholomew…he was already Duke?”

Will nodded. “I found out what he did and I went into Exilium to appeal to Lord Iris and Poppy was there too. Our patron returned me after two weeks had passed here. Bartholomew had just become Duke.”

Cathy realised how truly absent she’d been since the attack. “Why did Iris do that?” she wondered out loud. “Why deny you the chance to win the throne…normally?”

Will’s eyes were dark. “I’ve wondered that myself,” he said in a low voice.

Cathy didn’t want to dwell on talk of Iris and his schemes for them; it might remind Will of the pressure to have a child and she couldn’t face that

as well as everything else. “Well, you could argue that Cornelius didn’t help you take the throne, if he makes a fuss. I’m sure he’ll understand the plan has had to change. The Rosas weren’t popular here and if you put a disgraced one into the position of Marquis you’ll only be making it harder for yourself.”

He smiled. “Listen to yourself.”

“Yeah, what do I know? Do what you want to do.”

“No, you misunderstand. You’re giving me good advice. Like a Duchess.”

“Woot,” Cathy said flatly.

Will stared at her for what seemed a horribly long time. “There’s something else we need to talk about.” His tone was serious. “When you were—” He gripped the arm of the chair and turned a pale shade of green.

“Are you all right?” Cathy took his cup from him as he clutched his stomach.

“I’m being summoned,” he said. “I have to go.”

“We’ll talk when you get back,” Cathy said and he left her to sit amongst the books she had always wanted but was afraid to accept.

4

Max had just stretched out on the bed, found a position that alleviated the ache in his leg and closed his eyes when he felt the gargoyle's stare from the corner of his room. "Go on, ask."

"What?"

"You've been wanting to ask me something all day," Max replied.

"Why aren't we doing anything?"

"I haven't had any orders from Ekstrand."

The gargoyle clicked its stone claws on the floorboards. "We were stuck here for three weeks before he pulled his finger out and took the Agency. It might be another three months before he decides what he wants us to do next."

"And do you know what we should be doing?"

"Yes. We need to go back to London. Now Dante is dead we don't have to worry about putting his nose out of joint."

"Mr Ekstrand doesn't think it's a priority, otherwise he would have sent us. We don't know what Petra's finding even means. The Fae aren't in the habit of animating the dead. He needs time to think the implications through."

"Oh, right. I see. Sorry, it must be the stone between my ears but I thought it would be a priority to look into the corrupt Chapter that tried to kill us and let one of the bloody Fae try to murder someone in broad daylight. Stupid me."

"I haven't forgotten."

“Oh, so you just can’t be arsed to go and find out what went wrong there?”

“We can’t just leave.”

“We so can. Ekstrand is more than a few elements short of a periodic table, he wouldn’t even notice we were gone. The news about Dante is worrying, granted, but it’s just another reason to look into London. If the Sorcerer of Essex was dead before the moot, who was in charge when we were shot? Is that person still there? Is he the root of the corruption? And we need to know that what happened to the Chapter hasn’t happened anywhere else, or the Fae will be titting about with the innocents faster than you can say, ‘Look at the pretty sparkles’. And we should find out if Cathy recovered from that attack.”

“Why? We don’t need her any more. We found Thorn, we know the Sorcerer of Mercia is behind everything, we’re now at war. That puppet can be left to live her life as she sees fit.”

The gargoyle’s frustration rumbled out of its throat. “Thorn tried to kill her. Don’t you care? Actually, scratch that, of course you don’t. But *we* do, really, deep down.”

“No, I don’t,” Max said.

“But she needs Ekstrand’s help to escape Society. She’s been clear about that all along. And we need to do that before her husband—”

“Her husband,” Max interrupted, “is the Duke of Londinium now. Mr Ekstrand is never going to risk helping her escape from Lord Iris’ control now she’s Duchess.”

“What difference does being Duchess make? She’ll still want out.”

“She’ll be in the public eye more than ever now. You should forget about her and focus on what we need to do to stop Mercia.”

“We are not going to forget her,” the gargoyle replied, its stone chin jutting out.

Max turned onto his side, signalling that he’d prefer to sleep.

The gargoyle sat there sulking, then bounded across the room to Max’s bedside. “We can’t stay here waiting for a madman to tell us what to do next. We need to remember what we’re supposed to do.” It grabbed Max’s arm. “It’s not just following orders.”

Max gripped the sheets as the rush of frustration assaulted him. His heart banged as he struggled to manage the urge to leave the house immediately and get his investigation back on track.

“Sometimes knowing how you feel is a good thing,” the gargoyle whispered.

Max shrugged off the gargoyle’s hand and sat up on the edge of the bed as his head cleared. The gargoyle was right; he did need to go back to London, it had been left hanging unresolved for too long now. Even though the puppet wasn’t an innocent, the brazen attack was too much to ignore. “I’ll ask Ekstrand for permission to pursue the London investigation again.”

“No, let’s just go. It’s Sunday, he’s shit on Sundays—he’s scared of everything. On Mondays he only wants to talk about stupid stuff and eat cucumber sandwiches with Petra. Let’s face it, it’s going to be a week before he’s even remotely decisive again and who knows what could have happened by then?”

“We can’t just go without telling him.”

“Yes, we can. He won’t even notice. And when we report back we’ll tell him he sent us in the first place. He won’t remember.”

Max couldn’t argue with that. “We’ll go and see Cathy,” he said, getting onto his feet.

The gargoyle’s stone features rearranged themselves into something approximating an agonised grimace, but Max knew it was supposed to be a smile. “Great!”

“She could still be useful to us.”

“Wow, for a moment there I thought you might have actually wanted to know how she was.”

“I want to know if she’s well enough to help me. She’s the only person we have in London, and if we’re going to investigate corruption, who better to help than one of the puppets they’re supposed to police?”

As if he’d been sleepwalking and had suddenly woken up, Sam found himself standing next to a table laden with a buffet, a plate in one hand and a glass of wine in the other. The room was filled with the strangers who’d been at the funeral. He watched them talking to each other and listened to the guilty pauses after they laughed.

Leanne’s parents were doing what they always did: her mother was fussing over the food—even though it was all being handled by caterers—and her father was getting pissed in the corner furthest away from his wife. The room, as well as the caterers, was being paid for by Lord Iron. Sam hadn’t minded; it was better than having the wake at the house.

Iron was standing next to a large bay window and Neugent was in close conference with him, appearing very earnest as Iron listened carefully. At a distance it was Neugent who looked older with his white hair and pale skin. Iron’s black hair and deep brown skin made him look youthful and healthy in comparison.

Sam stared at the back of Neugent’s head. How had he killed Leanne, and all the other people who worked for him? Was there any way to prove

it?

He wanted to kill him.

“Sam?” A man he’d never met before held out a hand. “I’m Geoff, I worked with Leanne before she went up to the London office.”

Sam dumped the plate of food on the nearest table and they shook hands. “Hello.”

“I just wanted to say how sorry I am for your loss. Leanne was an amazing person.”

“Yeah.”

“She’ll be missed.”

“Yeah.”

Geoff necked the rest of the wine in his glass when the conversation ran dry. Sam didn’t want to talk to him—he didn’t want to talk to any of them—and Geoff had nothing else to say. Geoff wiggled the glass and said, “It was nice to meet you,” before hurrying away to get a refill.

Sam abandoned the wine next to his plate of unwanted food and left the room. His shoes clipped on the polished marble floor. He wished he smoked so he could legitimately stand outside and take deep breaths without anyone bothering him. He didn’t want anyone to give him sympathetic or pitying looks for a moment longer. He didn’t want anyone to see him at all.

“Sam.” Iron called his name from a doorway off the corridor just behind him.

Sam turned slowly. Was he supposed to thank him for the ostentatious arrangements?

“You can hide in here if you want.”

Sam didn’t need any further encouragement. The room was mostly filled by a large table, probably used for meetings. “Did you hire several rooms?” Sam asked.

“I own the hotel.”

“Oh. I didn’t realise that.”

“It’s part of a chain the company owns. You looked like you needed a break.”

Sam nodded and closed the door behind him as one of Iron’s security guys walked past to take a position nearby. “I’m not handling this very well.”

“Nonsense. There’s no need to perform for their benefit. You’re free to feel what you like and do what you like.”

“If only that were true.” Sam flopped into one of the leather chairs and let it tip back as he stretched his legs out.

“What would you really like to do?”

“Oh, I dunno. Killing Marcus Neugent with my bare hands would be top of my list.”

Iron stood near the door and said nothing for a few moments. “I think you need some time alone.”

When he left, Sam let his arms drop until his fingertips brushed the floor. He shouldn’t have said that about Neugent, one of Iron’s employees. He imagined standing in court on trial for Neugent’s murder and Iron reporting what he’d said. Sam tutted at himself. “Pillock,” he whispered.

It wasn’t long before there was a knock on the door. Thinking it was a member of staff, or Iron, Sam called out, “Come in.”

Marcus Neugent entered and closed the door behind him. Sam sat up. Every muscle he’d just relaxed snapped taut again.

“I wanted to speak to you. I hope you don’t mind.”

Sam watched him sit at one of the chairs on the other side of the table. “Look, I know you wanted to speak at the funeral but it just didn’t feel right.”

“That’s not what I wanted to talk about. And I understand. It was a family thing. I shouldn’t have asked.”

Sam rested his elbows on the table. “So what do you want?”

“I know you resented how much of Leanne’s time was taken up with her work.”

Sam kept silent. He didn’t know where Neugent was going with this and he needed to stay calm.

“I wanted to explain that it wasn’t anyone’s fault. She was very dedicated…I didn’t deliberately pull her away from home to work long hours.”

“Oh, so you’re saying her home life was so shit she didn’t need any encouragement.”

“No, not at all. I’m trying to help you realise that she loved her job and there’s no reason to be angry about that.”

“I’m not angry about that. I’m angry with you!”

Neugent’s white eyebrows arched in surprise. “Why?”

Sam wanted to say, “Because you killed her, you fuck,” but he couldn’t quite get the words out. He needed proof. Even just some evidence rather than just a pattern. “Because you were always phoning up and making her work late.”

“That’s the nature of our line of work. I know you resented it, and now she’s gone it’ll be even harder.”

“What do you want me to say? Thanks for ruining our marriage?”

Neugent’s frown had an edge of pity to it. “No. I wanted to give you my condolences in person, without everyone watching, and I wanted to see if you’re all right. I think that might have been a mistake. I’ll leave you in peace.”

When he stood Sam jumped to his feet. “Wait,” he said without even knowing why. He reached across the table, offering his hand.

After a pause Neugent shook hands with him. Sam had an impulse to pull him off his feet and smash his head into the table but then he noticed how grey Neugent’s skin was and another thought rose to the surface as he gripped his hand tighter: he’s dying.

Sam had no idea how he knew this—or what he was dying of—but there was an unshakeable certainty. Neugent felt wrong in some way. He studied Neugent’s skin, his eyes and the clammy palm and then another thought surfaced: he has leukaemia. But how could he know that?

Neugent was trying to break the handshake; it had lasted far longer than implicit social rules allowed. Sam released his hand, embarrassed and unsettled. “I’m sorry,” he said. “You’re really ill, aren’t you?”

It was the first time Sam saw Neugent look anything other than composed. His mouth hung open for a second or two and he took a step back. “You should be careful around Mr Ferran.”

“Mr Ferran? Oh, you mean Lord Iron.”

Neugent eyes became saucer-like. “I’m serious. Don’t—”

The door opened and Iron walked in. “Oh, I’m sorry, I didn’t realise you were in here, Marcus. Is everything all right?”

Neugent’s face became a mask of polite confidence. “Yes, I was just giving Mr Westonville my condolences. If you’ll excuse me.” He gave Sam one last look and left.

“Are you all right?” Iron asked once the door had shut. Sam nodded but he didn’t feel it. “Still want to kill him?”

“No,” Sam replied. The acidic desire to murder him had been diminished by the knowledge that Neugent wouldn’t see the year’s end. There were a hundred questions he wanted to ask Iron but he needed to feel

steadier before he did so. “I’m going home. I’ve had enough. I need to get in touch with people and…tie up loose ends.”

Iron nodded. “When you’re done, call me and I’ll send a car. There are things we need to talk about, but now isn’t the time.”

Sam searched Iron’s face. “Why are you doing this? Why are you so interested in me and my life? Leanne was your employee, not me.”

Iron came over and rested a hand on his shoulder. “When we’re back at my place we’ll talk. I promise.”

Will adjusted his cravat and checked his hair in the mirror. When he was satisfied he was presentable he took a few moments to steady himself. He’d done everything his patron had asked of him so there was no reason to be afraid. It didn’t alleviate the nerves. He took a step back, spoke Lord Iris’ name three times and watched the glass ripple until Exilium came into focus.

He stepped through and walked between the trees along a familiar path lined with blue irises. The clearing came into sight with Lord Iris sitting in his usual place surrounded by the woven half-sphere of saplings. Lord Poppy stood to the right, the epitome of elegance as he held his cane slightly away from his body, its tip planted to the right of his feet. They were both dressed in the Edwardian style, Poppy with a deep red waistcoat, Iris wearing one embroidered with blue and gold irises, as he had the last time Will visited.

Both were watching his approach but he felt the pressure of Iris’ stare more. Will walked through the clearing to kneel at his patron’s feet, keeping his head bowed.

“William, Duke of Londinium,” Lord Iris said, resting a hand on the top of his head.

“My Lord Iris,” he said, then when the hand moved and a long finger lifted his chin, he looked up at his patron. “I’m here to serve.”

“Good day to you, little Duke,” Lord Poppy said and Will gave him a curt nod. “Tell me, how is my—” He cut himself off, glancing at Lord Iris and giving him a mischievous smile. “How is your wife?”

“Much better, Lord Poppy, thank you for your concern.”

“I would dearly like to see her.”

“But I won’t permit it,” Lord Iris cut in. “Be satisfied she is recovering, Poppy.”

“Be satisfied I forgave yours for failing to protect her,” Poppy fired back. Will felt an urge to duck and find cover.

“We don’t need to go over this again, we’ve reached an accord,” Iris said and looked back down at Will. “You have pleased me. You destroyed the Roses—”

“My favourite did more,” Poppy interjected but Iris ignored him.

“And now we have Londinium. You’ve done all I have asked, and I look forward to the day you bring me news of your wife’s pregnancy.”

Will forced a smile. “I look forward to that day too, my Lord.”

“However, Lord Poppy has been greatly distressed by the injuries inflicted upon her and so we have agreed compensation. You are to appoint Thomas Rhoeas-Papaver as the Marquis of Westminster when you convene the Court.”

Will glanced at Poppy, who was smiling with satisfaction, then back at his patron. “Catherine’s brother? Forgive me, my Lord, but as a resident of Aquae Sulis, Thomas has no experience of the Londinium Court, no

leverage there and certainly no friendships that I'm aware of. He would bring little to the position politically."

"Are you saying the eldest son of my favourite family line has nothing to offer?" Poppy asked sharply.

"Not in entirety, Lord Poppy. I'm sure Thomas has a great deal to offer to the academic community in matters of twentieth-century warfare, but, as I far as I know, that knowledge may not be the most useful at Court."

"He's intelligent and very tall," Poppy said, chin in the air. "Both qualities will serve him admirably."

Will wanted to swear so much it would make flowers wilt but he kept his mouth shut and looked at Lord Iris, trying to convey how absurd the request was with his eyes alone. His patron looked into them with a hint of a smile that never materialised into anything substantial. "I'm sure my wife will be very pleased to have her family close again," Will said, trying to voice his concern about a direct line of communication to Lord Poppy.

Iris didn't acknowledge the subtext. "The decision is final," he said. "Now, if you'll excuse us, Lord Poppy, I wish to speak to William alone."

Poppy inclined his head at Iris and gave Will a glance before leaving. As they waited for him to go, Will struggled to maintain his calm expression whilst under his patron's intense stare.

"The alliance between our families in Aquae Sulis has served us well," Lord Iris said.

"Thomas isn't a politician."

"Are you?"

Will swallowed. His throat felt dry. "I aim to do my best."

"I'm certain Thomas will, too. He will be more trustworthy than many in Londinium. No doubt his father will press him to support you totally so as not to risk the alliance with your father."

So that was why Iris capitulated. It was small comfort, but a comfort nonetheless. “Was there something else you wished to discuss with me, my Lord?”

Lord Iris’ smile made Will shiver. “Oh, yes.”

Cathy woke to find a blanket pulled up to her chin and the tea cups cleared away. The fire was dying in the grate and she felt hungry. The blanket fell away as she sat up, wincing as the movement tugged at the wounds. She was bored of feeling disoriented every time she woke, bored of the pain, bored of being immobile. It was time to make plans.

She struggled to her feet, appreciating again how much fitness she’d lost. It wasn’t as if she was the sportiest of people, but when she’d lived in Manchester she’d walked everywhere to learn the layout of the city. She wanted a piece of paper and a pen to start ordering her thoughts and she wanted to write to Lucy. There was too much to face alone and she was certain a conversation with her sister-in-law would help. She wanted to phone Sam and see if he was all right, then remembered her phone had been in her bag when they were attacked. Would the police have it?

When she opened the door she saw nothing but the back of the huge man who’d followed them down the stairs earlier.

He turned and looked down at her. He had to be almost seven feet tall and his shoulders were wide enough to span the doorway. Instinctively she took a step back as he nodded at her. “Good afternoon, your Grace.”

“You’re the bodyguard…”

“Carter,” he said.

“Carter, yes, hello. Is my husband back?”

Carter shook his head. “No, your Grace.”

Cathy hoped Will was OK. Did Iris know she was better and think it was time to put pressure on him for siring a son? Whatever the reason, worrying wasn't going to give her any answers. "Listen, you can take the rest of the day off. I'm not planning to do anything more dangerous than writing a letter and reading some books."

He smiled. His teeth were even and white. "Only His Grace can relieve me of my duty, ma'am. I answer directly to him."

"And what exactly are his orders?"

"To escort you from place to place, to stand guard outside the room you're in and should anyone or anything pose a threat to your person, I'm to neutralise that threat immediately."

"Oh." Cathy pulled the blanket off the chair to wrap around her shoulders, suddenly cold. "Will is just overreacting. He'll get over it and you can go and do something more worthwhile. You're from the Agency?"

"Yes, ma'am, I'm one of their best. And, begging your pardon, I can think of nothing more worthwhile than protecting the Duchess of Londinium."

"Right…" Cathy marvelled at how sincere he seemed. She chewed the inside of her lip. Sneaking out to call her mundane friend was not something she wanted to be witnessed by a man in the pay of her husband who was probably spying for Bennet too. She couldn't trust any of the staff now. She wondered if she could give him the slip but it would be hard in her current state. No doubt he had something to protect himself against Charms, otherwise he'd be a poor guard. "Well, I don't want to be rude, but your being here isn't necessary."

"As I said, ma'am, that's up to the Duke. He said you might not be very enthusiastic."

"What else did he say?"

“That if you want to go into Mundanus, I’m to tell you, politely, that it isn’t permitted.”

“But what about Sophia? She needs to be there.”

“Other provisions have been made for her. I won’t inconvenience you, your Grace. It’s my job to protect you. I’d like to think my being here would make you feel better.”

She repressed the desire to unleash her arguments on him. He was just doing his job. It was Will she had to work on. She breathed in, reassured herself that she’d find a solution and then forced a smile. “All right then, Carter. Let’s try to get along until Will realises he’s being an idiot.”

He raised his eyebrows.

“Are you supposed to tell him everything I say, too?”

There was the briefest pause and then he shook his head. “No, your Grace, of course not.”

She smirked. “If you’re going to follow me everywhere, I’d like to know a bit more about you. Come and sit down.”

He didn’t move and looked decidedly awkward when she looked at him expectantly. Cathy knew she was crossing a social line; asking a member of staff to come and sit with her like a guest was not the done thing. Sod convention, she thought, it does nothing but keep people miserable.

She sat down and gestured at Will’s chair. “Come in, Carter, please.”

He jerked forwards and closed the door after a glance down the hallway, probably to check if anyone else saw. Cathy wondered what Morgan made of it all; if Carter answered directly to Will it broke the normal hierarchy of the butler being in charge of the male household staff. Being seen to enter her company in such an informal way wouldn’t help any tensions between them, but it was the perfect opportunity to learn more about the Agency.

“I never knew the Agency provided personal bodyguards,” Cathy said. “How long have you been one?”

“Since the age of twenty, your Grace.”

“What made you decide to go into security?”

Carter looked confused. “I was assigned to that specialism, your Grace.”

So he didn’t choose it. “Would they retrain you in something else if you didn’t want to be a security guard?”

The skin between his eyebrows pinched and a muscle worked in his jaw. After a few seconds he cleared his throat and said, “I’m very sorry, your Grace, I don’t quite understand what you mean. I’m doing what I was always meant to do. What more could a person want?”

Even though his confusion fascinated and chilled her, Cathy didn’t want to make him any more uncomfortable. “Indeed. How did you come to be in the Agency? If you don’t mind me asking.”

“Not at all.” He smiled, starting to relax. “I was born there.”

Cathy hadn’t expected that. “There are children born at the Agency?”

“Oh, yes, your Grace.”

The thought made her uncomfortable. If the Agency was willing to effectively wipe away Miss Rainer’s personality, would they be capable of providing a good environment for children to grow up in? As she was trying to settle on her next question three loud knocks reverberated throughout the house. She heard one of the maids squeal and run past the room. Carter jumped to his feet. “An Arbiter.”

“It’s all right,” Cathy said. “It’s probably someone following up on the attack. There’s nothing to worry about.”

Carter wasn’t reassured. He opened the door and looked down the hallway. Cathy could hear Morgan opening the front door but before anything was said Carter closed the library door behind him.

Cathy strained her ears but couldn’t hear anything except the front door close. Then footsteps approaching the library, and Morgan’s voice, which was too low for her to be able to discern individual words.

“That’s not possible.” She heard Carter perfectly well. “You’re not on the list of approved visitors.”

There was a list? There was little to distinguish between Will’s desire to protect and a means to control her and it made her feel nauseous. I bet Dame Iris is on that bloody list, she thought. There was the sound of another man’s voice, also too low to hear properly, then Carter again. “By order of His Grace the Duke of Londinium.” Cathy shook her head. Carter was so keen to do a good job he was even willing to try and keep an Arbiter away from her. Surely he knew no one in Nether Society had the right to do that?

Morgan and the Arbiter spoke. There was a pause and then a knock on the door. Morgan entered. “Excuse me, your Grace, but an Arbiter is here to see you. He says he needs to speak to you specifically.”

Carter stepped in behind him. “I’ll be present the entire time, ma’am, there’s nothing to—”

“Don’t be silly,” she interrupted. “Show him in, Morgan. Carter, you stay outside. An Arbiter is hardly going to hurt me, is he?”

Carter’s frown was quite dramatic, it couldn’t be otherwise with a forehead of such size. “I’ll be on the other side of this door, ma’am, if you need me—”

“I’ll be sure to squeal like a helpless princess, yes, thank you.”

She wasn’t expecting Max, not after the last time she saw him, but she pretended to adjust her blanket to disguise any emotion she might show in front of Carter. Morgan promised tea, a staple of any visit, which would also give him a good excuse to check up on her.

Carter closed the door slowly, the shadow cast by his frown making his nose appear even smaller.

“Good afternoon,” Max said in his usual monotone.

She beckoned him close and whispered, “The big man will be listening through the door, so we need to keep our voices down.”

“I have a better solution.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a slender box from which he took something that looked like a hatpin and stuck it into the door’s keyhole. “That will muffle our voices. May I open your window?”

“Of course.”

Max left his hat on the chair and lifted the sash window. The gargoyle climbed in, landing silently on the wooden floorboards, making it seem like it wasn’t really there. It came straight over to her as Max closed the window.

“How are you?” it asked in its smoker’s voice. “Was it bad? You’re thinner.”

She looked for any signs of the anger it had expressed with claws around her throat the last time she saw it. “I’m all right. Still recovering. Yes, it was very bad.”

“Sorry we were horrible to you,” it said, resting its stone chin on the arm of the chair, like a dog hopeful for a pat. “We thought you’d lied to us.”

She slowly reached across and stroked the top of its stone head as Max settled into the opposite chair. “All right. It’s all in the past. Thanks for the file, it’s been very useful.”

“The last information you got to us was good,” Max said. “We found Thorn. He confessed and it helped us progress our investigations, so as far as I’m concerned we’re even.”

“What did Thorn do?”

The gargoyle and the Arbiter exchanged a look. “You don’t know?” Max asked.

“Thorn was the one who tried to kill you,” the gargoyle said.

Cathy felt breathless as a memory of the knife returned with horrific detail. “But Will said it was a Rosa sent by Bartholomew. He didn’t say it was Lord Thorn himself.”

“He disguised himself with a Glamour,” Max said. “He wanted your husband to think it was a Tulipa. It seems it worked.”

Cathy realised she was shaking. “Oh, God, that’s awful. I mean, it was awful already, and I knew it wasn’t Bartholomew, but Will was convinced…” She had to tell him as soon as he got back. They had to tell Margritte. “Hang on, why did Lord Thorn attack me?”

“To get your husband into a lot of trouble with Iris and Poppy and thereby stop him from taking the throne.”

“And probably breathing too,” the gargoyle added.

“But that’s not why I’m here,” Max said.

She was still reeling from the news. “What about Lord Thorn? Is he still set on killing me?”

“He isn’t in a position to do anything.”

“The Sorcerer put him in a special box,” the gargoyle added. “You don’t have to worry about him. And his brother is still in Exilium. We checked.”

“We understand Sam saved you from Thorn,” Max said. “Have you been in contact with him?”

“He did? No one has mentioned him at all. I’m not sure they even know he was there, otherwise Will would have said something. I haven’t seen him since the attack. Oh, God, do you think he’s all right?”

“He survived and he’s been back home since then,” Max replied. “I just wanted to ask him some questions. His wife died whilst you were both in

hospital, so he wasn't in a state to talk about Thorn's attack."

"Shit." Cathy shook her head. "So much has been going on. Poor Sam. He was worried about her boss, did you know about that?"

Max nodded. "That's another thing I wanted to discuss with him."

A gentle knock on the door brought the conversation to a halt. The gargoyle scampered behind the curtains and Cathy called Morgan in. The tea was arranged and Carter had a good look at her before Morgan left. She tried to look fine, but felt like all the blood in her had sunk into the floor.

"I'll pour," Max said. "You look like you need a moment."

"Will killed Bartholomew and took the throne because he thought he tried to have me killed. If he'd known it was Thorn, Bartholomew would still be alive."

The gargoyle returned and sniffed at the cake next to the teapot. "This is only half of all the shit that's been blowing up over the last few weeks, believe me."

"What else is going on?"

Max was giving the gargoyle a familiar hard stare. "Not everything is suitable for discussion here," he said as he handed her the tea.

"But you came to see me for something," Cathy said after a couple of sips. "It wasn't just to tell me about Thorn, was it?"

Max shook his head.

"I wanted to see if you were all right," the gargoyle said.

She smiled at it and tickled behind its ears, liking the way its muzzle wrinkled.

"We need your help," Max said.

"Is this where you offer me the mythical help from the Sorcerer again?"

"We can't offer that," the gargoyle said. "He doesn't know we're here." It looked at Max. "I know that was top of your 'things not to talk about with

Cathy' list but there's too much going on for us to be all secretive and crap. You know it."

"I know you talk too much," Max said.

"We can't ask her to breach the Split Worlds treaty without an explanation," the gargoyle replied.

"You want me to do what?"

Max looked from the gargoyle to her. She thought she was getting used to his total lack of emotion, but it seemed odd when there was a clearly disagreement between him and his…pet without any corresponding irritation or anger. Max didn't say anything for a moment, which made the gargoyle groan. "There's corruption in one of the London Chapters. They were told to ignore any breaches made by the Rosas."

"Holy crap! Really?" Cathy had been taught the Arbiters were incorruptible. It was one of the reasons the Great Families were so afraid of them.

"Yep," the gargoyle replied. "And there's something dodgy going on with the ex-Sorcerer of Essex, so we need to find the Chapter as soon as we can and look into it."

"But why isn't your Sorcerer involved?"

"He's too busy fighting a war. And he's as mad as a bag of cats if you ask me."

So there was a war amongst the Sorcerers. Cathy wondered if her uncle knew about that. Should she warn him?

"That's enough," Max said. "There's something seriously wrong in London and you're the only person in the city and in Fae-touched society we can ask to help. I can't promise Mr Ekstrand will help you if you do this for us, but—"

Cathy held up a hand. “I don’t need his help any more. I’ve decided to stay.”

“Why?” the gargoyle asked. “You were dead set on getting out.” It narrowed its eyes. “You haven’t fallen in love or something?” It looked at Max. “You should check her for Charms, maybe—”

“It’s not that,” she interrupted. “I wanted to leave because it sucks to be a woman here. But it’s better to change it for everyone, than to just run away. And it’s the Agency too.”

“What about it?” Max asked.

Cathy feared the curse would kick in if she said anything negative about it. Was it only to stop her telling anyone about the blackmail, or speaking ill of the Agency too? Then she remembered Bennet’s warning about thinking twice before saying anything about them. He wouldn’t have said that if the curse prevented it. With the artefact in the keyhole, she decided to take the risk. “It’s dodgy.” She told them about Miss Rainer without coughing once.

“That’s nothing compared to what we saw last night,” the gargoyle began but Max held up a hand.

“That’s off-topic,” he said.

“Is it?” Cathy put her cup down. “You want me to breach the Treaty in the city of London when I’m supposed to be the Duchess of Londinium. It’s a big risk—what if I’m delivered to bloody Dame Iris by the local Arbiters? Lord Iris would kill me. No, actually, he’d do something worse.”

“I’ll be watching,” Max said. “When the Arbiter comes I’ll step in and handle it.”

It was still a huge risk. She’d have to do something very obvious and very public to get the immediate attention of the London Arbiters, and what if they didn’t listen to Max? He was working without his Sorcerer’s knowledge, after all. “I’ll do it—*if* you tell me more about the Agency and

get me any files I need." There were names in Miss Rainer's file she wanted to follow up, including other former students. Max was the only way she could find out more about them.

"That will be very difficult," Max said.

"Bollocks." The gargoyle put itself between her and the Arbiter. "He's just saying that to cover our arses and make out like it's something special. We can get you whatever you need to know. The files kept by the Agency are easy to get hold of now and they have one for every single person in your Nether Society."

Cathy wondered what they had in her file. She suspected Bennet had kept all of her secrets out of it, to preserve their blackmail value.

"Don't make promises we can't keep," Max said.

"And don't get in the way of something that could get us much further than we can alone," the gargoyle replied. "Cathy is our insider. She knows what it's like in their world, we don't."

"I know enough," Max said.

"We know enough to bust their asses when they step out of line, but not how the system works. And she's connected to the Fae in a way we can never be. Someone is messing everything up, not just in London but the entire Heptarchy and probably other places too, someone who knows Fae magic and sorcery. We have to collaborate if we're going to solve any of this, whether you like it or not."

Cathy sat back as the two of them stared at each other. She felt like she'd been obsessing over one messy room whilst the entire house was falling apart. Whilst she was desperate to hear about what the gargoyle and Arbiter saw that night, it wasn't the time to ask. Their relationship was strange, but then how could anything be normal when a walking, talking gargoyle was involved? Did all Arbiters have them? She didn't know what

the Heptarchy was and she didn’t know what the “someone” the gargoyle referred to had been doing, but one thing was clear: she had her first potential allies against the Agency.

“Listen, I know there hasn’t been much trust between us,” she said. “But I think the gargoyle is right. I don’t know how things work for Arbiters, but I do know that Nether Society is fundamentally unjust. It’s built upon suffering and I want it to change. We can help each other and I’m prepared to take a risk for you if you’re prepared to help me.”

Both she and the gargoyle looked at Max expectantly. “We’ll try it,” he said. “If your uncle can manage to work with the Sorcerer Guardian of Wessex perhaps we can manage to work together too. But if you try anything, it’s all off.”

“Understood,” Cathy said. “Same goes if you try to screw me over. But I do want things to change, and I think the gargoyle’s right.”

The gargoyle grinned. “Finally. Now let’s get to work.”

5

Sam stripped off the black suit and the shirt and stood in his underwear until he started to shiver. He needed to shower but could only face grabbing a pair of jeans and top from the bedroom floor.

The wake was probably still dragging on but he'd stayed as long as he could. He'd said an uncomfortable goodbye to Leanne's parents and walked all the way home. His feet still throbbed from walking in the formal shoes.

He tried to remember what it was like in the house when Leanne lived there but he could only remember the arguments so he went downstairs to see whether there was any beer left.

As he walked through the hallway a flash of green made him stop before he'd reached the kitchen. He looked back at the long mirror hanging where it always had and realised sunlight was shining out of it.

"Oh, shit."

A tapping sound drew him towards it, dreading what he'd see. He'd yelled at all the people in horror movies who go to investigate a strange sound and here he was doing it himself.

The mirror looked like a window onto Exilium and Poppy's faerie was tapping on it. When it saw him it waved and his shoulders drooped.

The glass appeared to liquefy as the faerie reached a tiny hand through it to beckon him. He considered running out of the house and never coming back but his feet still moved forwards as if his body had already made the decision.

“Fuck,” he said as he climbed through the surface of the mirror, feeling as if he was slowly putting his face into a pond but there was no water beyond the surface tension.

“Where have you been?” The faerie flitted about in front of him. “We couldn’t find you.”

“Busy,” he said, wondering if the chapel had offered some sort of protection. Then he realised it was probably something to do with Lord Iron’s house, seeing as his company provided a Fae-proof flat for Leanne. “What do you want?”

“Lord Poppy wants to see you. He’s over there.”

Sam trudged through the perfect meadow grass, irritated by the beauty of the birdsong. There were trees and poppies, like the time he’d come in with Cathy. He shoved his hands in his pockets and walked until he reached a clearing. Poppy was waiting with his cane and dozens of poppy flowers as if he had always been there and always would be.

“Ah! There you are. I’ve just seen my favourite’s husband and I feel the need to be cheered up.”

“He has that effect on me too,” Sam muttered. “I’m not the best person to cheer anyone up at the moment.”

“Oh?” Poppy came closer, swinging the cane ahead of him with each step. “Oh, dear, you do smell rather miserable. Has someone died?”

“Maybe.”

“Someone close to you.” Poppy squinted as he peered into Sam’s eyes. “My, what a delightful mess you are. I have just the thing to help.”

“Me or you?”

“Both of us, my little grieving one. Sit down.”

“This is counting towards my debt, isn’t it?”

“Oh, silly me!” Poppy snapped his fingers and the hourglass appeared. “Well, a minute here and a minute there is nothing between us.”

Sam had to really stare to catch sight of the grains of sand falling. There was still so much to go. Expecting to sit on the grass, he found himself caught by poppies forming a rudimentary seat beneath him.

“I want you to draw a picture for me,” Poppy said, reaching behind his back and pulling a pad of paper and a pencil from nowhere. “I have a renewed appetite for art, thanks to my little sunlit one having painted such a masterpiece. Have you seen it?”

“No. It was rolled up when I delivered it.”

“Oh. Maybe you will one day, maybe you won’t. I may have an exhibition and reveal it one time only.” He lowered his voice. “Did she tell you what the secret is? The one she painted into it?”

Sam shook his head, glad Cathy hadn’t told him. It meant he didn’t have to lie. “Nope. I haven’t got a clue. And I can’t draw so can I go home now?”

“Everyone can draw!” Poppy dropped the paper and pencil into his lap. “Try. Take as long as you need. Well, until I tire of your struggle and find an alternative way for you to be entertaining with a pencil.”

“I don’t know what to draw.”

“Not ‘what’—who. The one who died. Yes, that’s perfect. I want you to draw…” Poppy leaned down to peer into his eyes. “Her? Yes, a woman, I think. Your mother? No. Your wife!”

Sam stared down at the page, disturbed by how much Poppy could fathom from his face alone. He wanted to be anywhere else, doing anything else, but Poppy was desperate to do something awful, he knew it.

He started to draw but the face appearing on the page looked like something a six-year-old would be ashamed of. He went to turn the paper over but Poppy stopped him with his cane.

“Keep going. I must see how awful this will be.”

Sam’s mouth was so dry he could barely swallow. The lines on the paper bore no resemblance to Leanne—they didn’t even resemble a person. Poppy watched every hesitant stroke as the faerie sniggered. Sam just wanted to stick the pencil in Poppy’s chest and bolt.

“It’s done,” he finally said, unable to make it any worse.

Poppy took the piece of paper and tipped it from one side to the other before looking at Sam. “Did your wife look like this?”

“Of course not.”

“I can make you think she did.” Poppy watched the horror spread across Sam’s face. “No? You’d rather remember her as she was and suffer not being able to draw her?”

“Of course I bloody would!” Sam chucked the pencil across the clearing and stood up. “This isn’t a fucking game! She’s dead!”

Poppy’s expression was that of a child at the circus: utterly enthralled by a trapeze artist. He leaned closer, reaching towards his face. “Oh…” he whispered. “It’s exquisite.”

Sam leaned back but Poppy’s hand was too fast and he felt the gentlest brush across his cheek. Poppy pulled his hand back, a sparkling teardrop balanced perfectly on his fingertip. Sam touched his cheek and found it was wet.

Poppy lifted the drop to his mouth and tasted it with his horribly long tongue. “What a delicious creation! Grief and guilt and superbly piquant regret. You can go now. I want to enjoy this alone.”

Sam didn’t need any encouragement and hurried out of the clearing and towards the Way back to his house before Poppy said anything else.

Max checked there was no one on the fire escape. They were only a few feet from a busy pavement, tucked in a cramped alleyway between two huge buildings and thus far unnoticed by the innocents of London. He looked at Catherine, who was hunched in a coat and leaning against the wall. She was pale and looked tired. The gargoyle was sitting next to her, close enough to prop her back up if she needed it.

The gargoyle had said more than it should. Max took a moment to think through the reason he was there, examining each decision point for signs of her interference, or that of any of the puppets. She was happy to negotiate once they were there, but there was no way she could have steered events to force them to work together. At least, it wasn't apparent from the information at his disposal.

The gargoyle had driven it, not her. It had pressed for action, had suggested going to see her and had blurted out far too much when they were together. The gargoyle wanted this and it was a part of him. Did that mean *he* wanted this?

Impossible.

Something must have happened when the gargoyle…came into being. Something had changed it. A traumatic experience could affect the soul. It was the only explanation; he knew the puppets were untrustworthy and needed to be closely policed and his soul would know that too. Something must have warped as it became part of the stone. It wasn't the soul chain; Ekstrand had checked it.

He had to make sure the gargoyle didn't steer anything else.

"What are we waiting for?" the gargoyle asked. "I want to see this!"

It seemed excited. They were about to commit a criminal act and it showed no nervousness nor moral difficulty.

“Are you sure we have everything we need?” he asked Catherine and she nodded.

“I just need a place high up,” she said. “I wouldn’t be surprised if my bodyguard was watching this through a glass. Are you sure I won’t get into a hell of a lot of trouble?”

“There is a risk,” he replied, unable to lie. “But I am almost certain they’ll be far more interested in speaking to me than in prosecuting you.”

She nodded. “Because they’ll want to know why you’d let me do it.”

“And because they’re trying to kill him,” the gargoyle added. “Or at least they were the last time we saw them.”

Catherine looked from the gargoyle to him. “Tell me he’s joking.”

“It’s the truth,” Max said. “But critical circumstances have changed since then. I wouldn’t do this if I was sure I would be killed. I may be an Arbiter but I still have a self-preservation instinct like anyone else.”

She banged her head gently against the bricks behind her and then groaned. “Let’s get this over with. We’ve come this far and I want to see if it works. And I’m probably never going to have an opportunity to do anything like this ever again.”

“It’s gonna be great!” The gargoyle drummed its front paws on the ground. “Give the bag to me. Let’s go!”

Catherine hooked the handle over its lower jaw and then Max led her up the fire escape. He had to take it slowly, with his walking stick hooked over his arm, and she was soon struggling too. The gargoyle made its way up by a different route, its paws too unwieldy for the narrow metal ladder struts. It leapt from corners to wall to handrail to window ledge, reaching the roof of the building first. It had already emptied the contents of the bag and was snuffling at them by the time they reached it.

“Whoa, great view,” Catherine panted. “I just…need to sit for a moment.”

Max did too. The majority of the roof was flat and a walkway ran around the edge. The building’s facade extended above the roof line, creating a thick wall at waist height with periodic gaps perfect for spying purposes. He crouched behind it as best he could and looked down into Trafalgar Square. It was cold and the sky was a clear blue and the innocents were hurrying along the pavements as they always had. He watched tourists taking pictures of each other in front of the huge sculpted lions and people lunching together on the steps of the National Gallery. There were fewer pigeons than he remembered.

“I love it here,” Catherine said. “I walked through a few times but I could never stay very long.”

“When you ran away,” the gargoyle said.

She nodded, thoughtful. “That first time we met,” she said to Max. “Why wouldn’t you give me asylum?”

“That doesn’t exist for puppets,” he replied. “It’s never been necessary.”

“Are you seriously telling me that no one from the Nether has ever wanted to get out?”

“Never.”

“Doesn’t that surprise you?”

He shook his head. “You people have eternal youth, power, grand houses and an easy life. If we went down there and asked any one of those people if they wanted the same, they’d accept.”

“If you sold it to them like that, maybe. They wouldn’t if I told them the truth. What’s the point of eternal youth if all you do is sit around and do embroidery or talk about fashion or have endless dinner parties with the

same people over and over? No sunshine, no wind, no rain…just endless mist."

"But they've perfected how to deal with that," Max said. He knew the Fae lost puppets to illness in the early days after the Treaty, but that hadn't happened for a long time. His Chapter Master had a theory about magic worked into their anchors by the Fae to protect them but they never got to the bottom of it. It wasn't considered a priority.

"All they've perfected in the Nether is how to control people and keep everything the way they like it," Catherine said.

"Who's 'they'?" the gargoyle asked.

"The Patroons and the bloody Fae."

"If we came back tomorrow with a thingymebob from the Sorcerer saying you could leave and never go back, would you take it?" The gargoyle was too interested in her.

Catherine sighed. "Oh, God, I'd be tempted. A few weeks ago I would have, and never looked back. Now…" She shook her head. "No. I can't. It wouldn't be right."

"We should begin," Max said, aware of the time.

"Perfect weather," Catherine said, retrieving the largest box from the pile behind them. "Will said it was raining earlier. Must've cleared up."

Max watched her tackle the modern packaging and listened to her swear like a mundane. She was different. None of the other people in the Nether he'd ever dealt with would have come up with such an unusual—and mundane—solution to the challenge.

"You're sure this will work?"

"As sure as I can be," she said as she slid the remote control helicopter from the last of the packaging. "I had a…friend when I lived in Mundanus.

He had one of these. He made a payload carrier to fly M&Ms to me." She smiled to herself. "It made him happy."

As Catherine unwrapped batteries and fiddled with a reel of cotton, Max looked up at the statue of Nelson. The statue was still higher than them as the column was so tall but it was easier to see it from where they were.

"Don't worry," she said, pulling a small bundle of fabric from the inside of her coat. "It'll work. Nelson must have had a really loud voice to be heard over all that cannon fire and yelling."

"I'm not worried," he replied.

"But it won't actually be Nelson," the gargoyle said. "So what difference does it make if the real one was loud?"

"For an Arbiter's assistant you don't know much about Animation Charms," Catherine said and the gargoyle laughed. It sounded like someone scrubbing the inside of a cement mixer.

"I'm not—"

"Going to distract Catherine any further," Max cut in.

"It's nice not being called 'puppet' all the time," she said. "Do you know how this Charm works?"

Max didn't want to admit that he didn't; it wasn't a good idea to give the puppets any idea of the limits to an Arbiter's knowledge. "I know the effects."

"It's just wish magic," she said casually. "Just a narrow form of it, and weak too." She'd finished unravelling the strip of fabric and an oval phial sat in the palm of her hand. She held it up and the sunlight made the contents sparkle. In fact, there was nothing else in there except sparkling, like a pinch of glitter suspended in a trapped gust of wind. "You can only cast it on one object and it'll only behave in the way you'd expect it to. I got this for a teddy bear for a…cousin."

“Where did you get it from?”

She tapped the side of her nose. “Trade secret.”

“The rules of the Treaty dictate you tell me,” Max reminded her.

“Oh, come on. You say that when I’m about to create a massive breach? Surely we’re off the hook here? I told you about how it works, that has to be enough.”

He let it go. If she decided not to help them he couldn’t force her. Even if they took the phial from her he wouldn’t be able to use it and there was no way he would let the gargoyle touch it.

The gargoyle had been remarkably quiet. It was staring at the phial and grinding its stone teeth together. “Would you be able to use that on a dead body?”

“Euw!” Catherine’s nose wrinkled as Max realised what the gargoyle was wondering. “That’s gross. I have no idea. You can’t use it on people—living people, that is—I know that. It has to be inanimate and this one can only be cast on something that looks like a person or an animal. There are more powerful ones. I heard Oliver Peonia used one to make some teaspoons dance at a garden party.”

Petra told them the Sorcerer of Essex was already dead when the magic turned his heart to stone. Could it be possible that the person behind that magic had animated Dante’s corpse to walk in and take his place at the table? The other Sorcerers wouldn’t have noticed at first glance; Petra said his face had been covered in makeup to give him a healthy appearance. The Sorcerers weren’t the most sociable of people and the others would have written off his silence as normal. Before they had a chance to find out what was going on, they were killed.

But how could that Charm have endured once past the threshold? There were wards against Fae magic. Could the person who killed Dante have

found a way to mask it? It led the trail back to London. Who would know where to find Dante? Not even the other Sorcerers would know where he lived. Someone in his household? An apprentice perhaps, someone who had close access to him and also would be able to discover where the Chapters were under Dante's command. Perhaps the source of the corruption was an apprentice compromised by the Fae.

"But why?" the gargoyle asked him.

"Because garden parties in the Nether suck," Catherine replied, thinking he was asking about the spoons.

To kill the other Sorcerers, Max thought. Without the Sorcerers to run the Chapters and monitor the weak points between Mundanus and the Nether and Exilium, the Fae could work towards an escape. The puppets would be set free in Mundanus and the Fae would use them to find the best of humanity to become their playthings.

"Right, it's ready."

Catherine's announcement refocused his attention. "Do it," he said. They needed to get an Arbiter and use him to find the Chapter. Quite what he would do afterwards was uncertain, but there was absolutely nothing they could do to find a rogue apprentice without knowing where to start.

He made sure he and the gargoyle couldn't be spotted from the square, not wanting to risk being picked off at a distance. If they only saw Catherine, the Arbiter would come to them and then he would reveal his involvement.

Catherine had tied the phial to a length of cotton attached to the bottom of the helicopter's landing struts. After switching it on she very carefully used the small control box in her hands to make the craft fly upwards until the phial was hanging beneath it.

“Well, that’s the first bit done,” she said. “I was worried it would be too heavy. Let me just get the hang of the controls and then I’ll do it.”

Max watched the tiny craft fly around above the air-conditioning vents and lead lining of the flat roof. Its high-pitched whine was too quiet to be heard from the street or in the offices below. The gargoyle was as enraptured as a child by a spinning top. They’d bought it from a shop Catherine had described as a toyshop for grown-ups. Technology really had been advancing in Mundanus. The last time Max saw a toy plane it had been made of balsa wood and could only be thrown and left to the mercy of the wind.

“All right, are you really sure you want to do this?” she asked.

“Yeah! Yeah, do it!” The gargoyle cheered but she was looking at Max.

He had one last good look around and nodded. “Do it.”

By manipulating two sticks under her thumbs Cathy steered the helicopter over the edge of the roof and into the air above Trafalgar Square. Max looked down at the tourists and London residents and not one of them was pointing at it. He looked around again for any sign of Arbiters or her bodyguard but there were none. The Arbiters wouldn’t be far away though; it was a busy space that attracted a lot of attention and a lot of people who wouldn’t be missed immediately if they disappeared. Before his Chapter had been destroyed the area around the Roman Baths and the Royal Crescent were regularly patrolled after several tourists disappeared over a summer. The puppets exploited the crowds and used Charms to attract those who were lost. Max wondered if any had been taken in recent weeks.

“Bollocks,” Cathy muttered and the gargoyle’s claws scraped against the ledge as it gripped it tighter. “This is hard.”

Max could see the problem. It was hard to gauge the exact distance between them and the statue. The motion of the helicopter was making the

phial swing back and forth so when a new approach was made it still missed.

“Let me have a go,” the gargoyle said.

“No, I nearly have it,” she replied, biting her lip. “I just need to practise.”

She made three more attempts, swearing every time she missed and then on the fourth the phial smashed into Nelson’s hat. “Yes!” Catherine yelled. “Gotcha!”

The sparkles showered over the statue as Catherine brought the helicopter back to land at her feet. As soon as it was switched off she went back to the gargoyle’s side and all three of them watched closely.

Nothing happened for a few moments and then it looked like Nelson shivered. “Did you see that?” the gargoyle asked.

“It’s starting to work,” Cathy said and they grinned at each other.

The gargoyle seemed to be enjoying the illegal activity far too much.

“Good lord!” A loud voice boomed out from the statue and Nelson’s head moved from left to right as if he’d just woken up. “What the devil am I doing up here?”

Catherine whooped with joy and the gargoyle clapped her on the back, which made her cry out in pain. As the gargoyle apologised Max watched Nelson hold out his one arm as if he were trying to steady himself, and then he crouched, just like any man would who found himself atop a plinth a hundred feet off the ground.

“How the deuce did I get up here? I say!” Nelson shouted down at the ground. “You there!” He was pointing at a man posing for a photograph beside one of the lions. “Fetch a ladder!”

Catherine’s prediction was right—probably because the Charm was manifesting what she’d expected him to be—and his voice was incredibly

loud. The tourist looked up and almost fell over when he saw Nelson waving his hat to get his attention.

In moments all the people around the man were looking up. In seconds almost everybody in Trafalgar Square had stopped and most were pointing at Nelson. In less than a minute over half of them were holding up their phones and pointing them at the animated statue.

“What are they doing?” Max asked.

Catherine was flushed with excitement. “They’re filming him!” She clapped her hands. “It’ll be on YouTube in no time!”

“On what?”

“On the internet. They’re going to be talking about this on Twitter from London to Los Angeles before the day is out. This is so cool!”

Max had no idea what Twitter or YouTube were but he knew about the internet; the researchers at the Chapter used it and had mentioned it when briefing him before field trips. It was a giant library of information that anyone could access and it sounded like the events unfolding in front of them were going to be added to it. He had no idea that just anyone could enter information; he thought it was curated by librarians.

“You never said that would happen.”

“What the hell did you think would happen?”

“Are their telephones taking pictures?”

“Video. Bloody hell, Mr Arbiter, you need to come into the twenty-first century. It’s great here.”

The gargoyle gave him a worried look. “Lots of people will see it, not just those here.”

“Thousands. Maybe millions,” Catherine said. “It’s priceless.”

Nelson was getting more and more flustered. Every time he waved his hat the spectators below cheered and waved back, only making him more

irate. “Will someone please send a carriage to Admiralty House? Why is no one helping me?”

If anything was going to set off an Arbiter intervention, it was this. Max couldn’t do anything about what the innocents were doing, but he could stick to the original plan. He took his pocket binoculars from a coat pocket and peeped through a gap to scan the edges of the crowd for Arbiters. It didn’t take long to spot one. Max didn’t recognise him but he was still unmistakably devoid of emotion and not swept up in the roar of the crowd at all.

The London Arbiter was walking through the crowd, scanning those around him to identify the guilty puppet. He stopped and pulled a phone out of his pocket, looked at it for a moment and then appeared to take a call. The London Chapter was using mobile phones! There was a brief exchange and then he looked straight up at Catherine.

“Shit!” The gargoyle ducked lower. “They’re onto us.”

“That’s what you wanted, isn’t it?” Catherine asked. “Where is he?” She leaned out and looked for the man, who had taken his own binoculars out and was looking up at her. “Oh, I see him.”

There had to be another, someone who’d seen them on the roof and tipped off the one in the square. Max looked behind them and checked the fire escape but no one was coming up yet. No one had tried to shoot him, at least. Perhaps they didn’t want to risk it with the Duchess of Londinium as a witness.

Catherine waved at the Arbiter, then pointed to Nelson and gave a thumbs-up.

“What are you doing?” the gargoyle hissed.

“I wanted him to know it was us,” she said. “In for a penny, in for a pound.”

Max watched the Arbiter stare at them for a few moments and then press a button on his phone. Trained in the rudiments of lip reading, Max focused on the man's mouth and saw him speak Catherine's full name.

"He'll be here any minute," Max said. "We just need to wait."

"Damn, I wish I still had my iPad," Catherine said sadly. "I'd love to see how people are explaining this. And I hope you're right about me not getting into trouble. You will tell them I did it for you, won't you?"

"Yes."

The Arbiter put his phone and binoculars away, turned around and left the square at the opposite side to where they were. The person who'd tipped him off must have said he'd deal with it.

They waited. The gargoyle stayed hunkered down and seemed to have lost interest in Nelson's antics. Catherine was entertained for a little while then started to look tired again. The thrill was wearing off.

"I thought they'd be here by now," she said. "I'm getting cold. And Carter's probably bursting a blood vessel. If you weren't an Arbiter there's no way he would have let us leave and I bet he's freaking out about it."

"I thought they would be here too," Max replied. They had had ample time to secure backup, especially as they were using phones in the field. It was almost as if they didn't care. "It's like the Rosas."

"Maybe it's because I'm the Duchess," Catherine suggested. "You said the Rosas were exempt before Lady Rose fell. Maybe it's because they were the ruling family. Maybe it's a Londinium thing and no one's had a chance to tell me yet."

"No family should be exempt, regardless of their status," Max said. "I should take you home."

"But how the arse are we going to speak to them now?" the gargoyle asked. "You'd think they'd at least come and tell her off."

Max agreed. It was decidedly odd. Even if the ruling family was exempt, surely a breach of this magnitude would trigger some kind of reprimand. It was clear the corruption was still strong in Londinium, regardless of Dante's death.

"We'll think of something," he said and noticed Nelson had stopped shouting.

"Oh, it's worn off," Catherine said with disappointment.

Max looked at the statue, inanimate once more but now crouching, hat off and frozen in mid-wave. He was interested to see how that would be explained away.

6

Lord Iris laced his long fingers together and stared at Will. “Lord Tulip is upset by our recent success. The events in the throne room were rather dramatic, all told.”

Will nodded, taken back to Margritte’s grief and the blood on his sword. It still made him want to close his eyes and curl up somewhere dark and far away from people. But he couldn’t give in to such childish urges. He was the Duke of Londinium and he had to move forwards.

“Whilst everything settles down, you must focus on Londinium.” Iris leaned forwards and lowered his voice to a whisper. “The Arbiters of London will turn a blind eye to any activities north of the river initiated by you or any others of the Iris family, and will actively defend your interests should a conflict arise with another party.”

It took a moment to process what he’d said. “I don’t understand, my Lord. Are you saying I could cast a Charm in mundane London with no risk of punishment?”

“I’m saying exactly that. And, when you need them to, they will lie for you. Should you need to speak to one—” he pinched his fingers in the air and a piece of paper appeared between them “—go into Mundanus and use this. I assume it means something to you.”

He gave the piece of paper to Will who unfolded it. A telephone number was written in blue ink. “It does, my Lord. But…I thought the Arbiters were incorruptible.” As far as he knew, not even the Patroon had ever had carte blanche to do as he wished in Mundanus.

“If there is one thing that is true of all humanity, it is that everyone is corruptible, William. A fact I’m sure you will appreciate all the more once the Court reconvenes. The Dukedom will be an interesting challenge for you. I expect perfection. And a child.”

Will looked down at the leaves beneath Lord Iris’ shoes. He felt a certain empathy with them. “My wife almost died, my Lord. It’s…delayed our schedule somewhat.”

“A son within a year, William. You may leave.”

Will stood and bowed. “I shall continue to strive to meet your expectations.”

He left the clearing and stepped through the Way back into his study. Alone once more, he realised the implications of what he’d just been told. If the Arbiters were capable of lying, the one at the hospital could have lied to him. But if that were true, who had told that man to lie?

Sam rolled the snooker ball towards the far cushion, caught it when it rolled back and did the same again. Back and forth, the white ball left tiny tracks in the baize. There was a bar billiards table behind him, an old-fashioned pub skittle game in the corner, and pinball machines. The games room of Lord Iron’s grand estate was bigger than the footprint of his own house in Bath. He felt lost there. It was like staying in a huge hotel off-season, melancholy in its emptiness. There were people maintaining the house, and a cook, but none of them treated him like a normal person. He was a guest with nothing to do except wait for Lord Iron to find a gap in his schedule for him.

He didn’t really want to stay but after Poppy’s latest interference he didn’t want to stay at home either. He felt a tension in his chest that he tried

to shut out with beer and TV in the palatial room he'd been given.

Why was he here?

"Sam, I'm sorry, the call to Buenos Aires had a terrible line. Have you eaten?"

Sam nodded.

Iron looked at the snooker balls. "Do you play?"

Sam shrugged. "I haven't for years, not properly." He sometimes played pool at the pub with Dave. It felt like he'd lived three lives since he went to work every day and went home in the evenings. "Do you play?" he asked.

Iron nodded. "When I have the time. So." He clapped his hands. "They gave you the tour of the Manchester office, I understand. What did you think of my business?"

Sam rolled the white again. It hit a red and struck out in a different direction. He didn't try to catch it. "Impressive."

Iron took off his jacket, loosened his tie and went to the rack on the wall holding the snooker cues. "Anything catch your eye?"

The only thing that had caught Sam's eye was a toy zombie on one of the desks in a huge room full of partitioned work stations. It leaped out at him as something individual in a sea of banal corporate decor. When his guide was distracted by a query he'd picked up the toy and found it was designed to be squeezed like a stress reliever. When he crushed it in his fist the zombie's eyes bulged and he'd almost laughed. Almost.

Iron struck the white with the cue and the noise startled Sam out of the memory. One of the red balls dropped into the corner net next to him. "Well, I saw a lot."

"What did you think of the office?"

He remembered how excited the man who'd given the tour had got when they reached the top floor. "This is one of the best offices in

Manchester," he'd said as he opened the door. "You can see everything from up here."

"It had a good view," Sam said as Iron potted another red.

"Could you see yourself being happy there?"

Sam stuffed his hands in his pockets. Normally he would lie, out of politeness, but he didn't have it in him. "I'm not sure if I could be happy anywhere at the moment."

Iron was lining up another shot but when he heard Sam's words he straightened up and laid the cue on the baize. "It's too soon. I'm sorry."

"No, it's not that. I just…don't feel like I want to work somewhere like that. It's too…"

"Big?"

"Soulless." Sam winced. "Shit. Sorry, I know you're this amazing businessman but it's just not my scene. Leanne loved all that kind of stuff, not me."

Iron picked up his jacket. "Let's go for a walk."

Sam had walked around the estate several times since he'd arrived. He knew he had to go back to Bath again soon. Just like he had to follow up on the items in Leanne's will. There were things to pass on to friends and family, charities some of her savings were supposed to go to and a huge list of companies and mailing lists to notify about her death. Some loose ends, like her Facebook account, he simply didn't know how to tackle. And there was the sealed envelope the lawyer had given to him. His name was written on the front in her handwriting and it felt like there was a key inside. As much as he wondered what was there, he couldn't face opening it yet.

She'd insisted on life insurance years ago and he was going to get a lot of money once all the paperwork was sorted. He didn't have to rush into

anything and he didn’t have to worry about paying the bills. Before she died that would have been liberating. Now the freedom just felt empty.

It was sunny and cold outside, the kind of morning that autumn did best. The trees at the edges of the extensive lawn were varying shades of oranges, reds and golds. Birds were singing and Sam couldn’t hear any traffic or planes. Iron set off across the grass towards the trees and Sam hurried to fall into step alongside him.

“Death is so hard,” Iron said after a while. “Take as long as you need.”

“At the wake you said you’d give me some answers.”

“I did, didn’t I. You want to know why I’m helping you?”

Sam nodded. “That bloke at the office told me that your corporation employs over a hundred and fifty thousand people worldwide and that’s not counting all the subsidiary companies. I reckon, with all those employees, people die whilst working for you fairly often. And I reckon you don’t invite all of the bereaved spouses to your home to grieve.”

“I don’t.”

“So why me? What do you want?”

Iron stopped and looked back towards the house. It was a sprawling mansion with over a hundred rooms and hardly any of them lived in. “I feel guilty. I knew there was a pattern, I didn’t act quickly enough and your wife died.”

It sounded all too familiar to Sam. “Do you know why? What caused those deaths? It was Neugent, wasn’t it?”

“He was a causal factor, I think, but it wasn’t murder. He didn’t actively do anything to her and it wasn’t his fault.”

“So how come it’s not his fault if he’s the cause?”

“I think it was a side-effect of her working with him.”

Sam rubbed a hand over his face. He felt tired of thinking about it. He just wanted someone to tell him exactly how it happened. “Are you even certain it was like that?”

“Yes.” Iron started walking again. “I’ve seen it before. But this time, I could help the person hurt the most by the loss. I couldn’t with the others. I doubt I will again.”

“So there’s nothing we can do to stop it happening again?” Sam turned up the collar on his jacket. The last of the warmth from the house had left him.

“I…have some ideas but nothing has come to fruition yet. As for Neugent, I’ve given him a generous retirement package.”

“Not that he’ll have long to enjoy it.” Sam realised too late that he shouldn’t have said it. “I know he’s ill.”

“He told you?” Sam nodded. “He’ll receive the best medical care. Once he realises it’s terminal he’ll go and live out the rest of his days on my island, I imagine.”

“You have an island?”

Iron nodded. “In the Caribbean. It’s very peaceful there. Would you like to go and have a few weeks in the sun? I’ll make sure he doesn’t go there until you’re ready to leave.”

Sam tried to imagine himself on a beach. “Not right now, thanks. You didn’t really expect me to do anything to him, did you?”

“No,” Iron replied. “I just wanted to give you a chance to work it through. Better to speak those thoughts than keep them buried. I think there’s something else that would do you much more good right now.”

They’d reached the treeline and Sam saw a trail he hadn’t noticed from the house. His walks had taken him round the back of the house where a stream ran through the woods. The trail went on for twenty metres or so

until the trees thinned and a small one-storey stone building came into view. It had a chimney with smoke puffing out of it in fat clouds.

“I think you have a great deal of potential,” Iron said, heading for the cottage. “But I think it’s trapped. Under grief, under depression, under a lack of self-belief. I have the feeling that you’ve never really strived to achieve anything. Am I right?”

Sam wanted to say no but when he tried to think of something he had really worked hard for, he couldn’t.

“You’ve coasted and done just enough to have an average life.”

“There’s nothing wrong with that,” Sam said.

“Not at all,” Iron replied. “If you’re an average man.”

He led Sam to the other side of the building, which was open to the woods. There were two huge wooden doors which had been slid open revealing a forge inside. A man who looked like he was in his sixties was working a huge set of bellows, making the fire roar beneath the chimney.

“When I’m stuck, I come down here and work the metal,” Iron said. “There’s nothing like doing something real with your hands, making something solid that you can see and touch. I’ll look after the fire,” he said to the man. “You go and take a break.”

Sam looked at the anvil and the rows of tools hanging, waiting to be used. He walked in as the older man left and picked up one of the huge hammers. It felt heavy and…real. More real than anything had for a long time. “So this is why they call you Lord Iron? It’s a nickname?”

Iron was looking at the fire. “That’s one of the reasons,” he said quietly. “Now. Let’s get to work.”

7

Margritte tried not to listen to the sound of her son retching in the room next door. She drummed her fingertips on the table as she waited but the rhythmic tapping did nothing to block out the noise. She tried not to let the fatigue take her; there was much to do before she could go to bed, but it would all come to naught if her son didn't pull himself together.

The door opened and he came back in. His face was the same colour as his lace cuffs. He sat down next to the fire, shivering.

"Feeling better?"

He glared at her. "I haven't been able to keep a thing down since I got back from the Patroon. I can't believe what you've done, Mother."

"Did you think me utterly incapable?"

"I'd hoped you'd heed my advice and not suck the entire family into your hasty decision."

"Well, Lord Tulip and the Patroon didn't feel the same as you. Now, are you going to face up to what's ahead of us or are you going to cower over a chamber pot whilst the Patroon chooses who'll take your place?"

She felt a pulse of guilt as his brow furrowed, but, if she pandered to his weakness, events would soon overtake him.

"I can't march into Londinium and challenge the Duke. He bested father. I haven't picked up a sword for over fifty years!"

"That child bested your father because he had the backing of his patron. Now you do. And your father was unprepared. Neither of us expected the

attack. The Iris boy acted alone in that Court, but you will have several families behind you."

He twisted in his chair to look at her. "Who?"

"The Wisterias, Violas and the Peonias." She smiled. "I didn't only speak to the Patroon."

"What have you done?" Alexander leaned forwards and buried his face in his hands. "That's half of the colleges dragged in."

"Those colleges wouldn't belong to those families had it not been for your grandfather, don't you forget that. They owe us a great deal. Supporting us in our time of need is the very least they can do. I know you want this to go away but life isn't just books and theory. It's family and honour too."

"And power," he said. "That's all you care about."

"The only reason you've been able to enjoy this blissful life is because of the hard work of your ancestors. You've never had to struggle with anything more difficult than a philosophical debate. It's time for you to grow up and do your duty or I'll be the first to tell the Patroon that you're not man enough to do so."

He stared at her, wide-eyed and childlike. "Can't you see what this is doing to you?" he whispered. "The monsters are making you monstrous."

She looked away from him, feeling a sting in her chest. She didn't want to tell him that she'd thought about walking away. She had sisters in Europe she could go and live with, far away from all the memories of life with Bartholomew. But every time she decided to do that she thought of William Iris sitting where Bartholomew should have been, living the life her husband should have enjoyed. There would be no peace in her until his name was cleared.

A knock at the door made both of them jump. “Are you expecting anyone?” she asked, and Alexander shook his head.

He stood. “Come in.”

A young man walked in looking like he had just stepped out of Mundanus, wearing jeans and a jacket over a hooded top. He was carrying a large cardboard cup and something that smelled like the most awful food imaginable, sealed in a carton made of a material she didn’t recognise. He dumped them on the table and shrugged a bag off his back.

“Chancellor!” Alexander gasped and bowed as deeply as one would to a Patroon.

“Hullo, Alex, bloody cold out there. Christ on a bike, you look like shit.”

“I…I am a little unwell.”

“Well, I won’t shake your hand then. Is this your mum?”

“Yes, may I introduce you to Margritte Semper-Augustus Tulipa. Mother, this is the Chancellor of Oxenford, Sorcerer Guardian of Mercia, King of the mundane lands between the Severn and the Pennines, the Western sea and the river Ouse, holder of the pure Malvern springs and—”

“Just call me Rupert, Mrs T, pleasure to meet you.”

For the first time in over a century, Margritte was lost for words.

“Mother,” Alexander whispered.

Rupert grinned. “Not what you expected? Yeah, I’m used to that. Met many Sorcerers, have you?”

“I can’t say I have, sir,” she replied. “But I would expect the Chancellor of Oxenford to be more…formally attired.”

“Oh, I dress up for Congregation and Council meetings. I’ve even worn a tie a couple of times. I know you lot expect Sorcerers to wear top hats and capes and stuff but honestly, I’d look like a wanker dressed in all that. I

wore a top hat at a Halloween party last year, but only pretentious tossers wear that gear all the time."

Margritte found him hard to follow and even harder to take seriously. Was this a prank? She watched him sit down and open the strange container. The room was filled with a pungent meaty smell. Alexander covered his mouth with a handkerchief.

"You don't mind if I eat, do you? I'm starving—been running round like a blue-arsed fly all day." He looked up from the food at Margritte. "You ever had a kebab?"

She shook her head and tried her best not to look shocked as he dug his unwashed fingers into the tray and plucked out a stringy piece of meat.

"This is from the van on Broad Street. Usually I get cheesy chips from them and kebabs from the one on—" He stopped himself. "You're not going to give a shit about that, are you?" He went back to eating.

"Are you sure he's a Sorcerer?" she whispered to Alexander, who nodded from behind the silk. "I should leave you to your business," she said, standing up.

"Actually," Rupert said through a mouthful of kebab, "I'm here to see you. You don't mind if I have a chat with your mum, do you, Alex?"

"Not at all, Chancellor. See you soon, Mother." Alexander rushed from the room and Margritte was left with the sound of a pig eating at a trough.

"Sit down, Maggie. Do you mind if I call you that?"

She bristled as she sat back down. "No one calls me Maggie."

"Great. Maggie it is. Sure you don't want to try this? It's really good."

"No, thank you."

She took the opportunity to get used to his savage behaviour as he wolfed down the mundane food. Surely it was an act to throw her off balance? No one as powerful as the Sorcerer of Mercia was rumoured to be

could have such abominable manners. He even put Freddy Viola to shame. He wanted her to think he was a stupid, uncouth mundane when he was in fact a powerful man with the power to destroy them all on a whim. You won't fool me, she thought.

He looked young, not much older than she did, and she had hardly spent any of her adult life in Mundanus. He seemed very relaxed about popping out of the Nether for food, suggesting he wasn't concerned about ageing as she would be. As far as she knew he'd been the Sorcerer for hundreds of years; certainly Bartholomew's father had talked about a Rupert. Had he mastered youth as part of his sorcerous arts? He wasn't unattractive; at least he would polish up well after a shave and a haircut.

He licked his fingers, guzzled down the contents of the cup and then belched as loudly as a braying donkey. Slapping his stomach he slouched back in the chair and grinned. His lips were shining with grease and a sliver of meat was stuck between his front teeth. "That's better. I heard about what happened, by the way. I'm sorry you lost your husband."

"I didn't misplace him," she replied. "He was murdered."

"Right. Yeah." He opened his bag and pulled something out which at first glance looked like a book. He lifted its cover and tucked it underneath, revealing a slab of black glass. Margritte clenched her teeth. It was the first sorcerous artefact she'd ever seen.

He pressed its side and it lit up like an incredibly powerful scrying glass. It was looking into a forest at night, but there were arcane symbols arranged in rows on top of the image. He tapped one and the scene changed into a grid of boxes containing text and different background colours.

"I bet you've never seen one of these before," he said, tilting it to show her more. "Good battery life, killer display. Sucks I can't get the internet in

the Nether but I’m working on that. I just got this zombie game and it’s so addictive.”

She had no idea what he was talking about but didn’t want to look too enchanted by it. He was only showing off.

“Is this why you wanted to see me? To show me your artefact?”

He sniggered. “Oh, you guys, you’re priceless. No. You see this?” He waved a finger over the grid. “It shows when we have Convocation, Hebdomadal and sub-committee meetings, the monthly piss-up and all the other stuff that keeps the university ticking over. You see all the red? That shows when people—important people like your son, for instance—have sent apologies in advance for not being able to attend.” He swiped a finger across the glass and the grid moved in the same direction. There were a lot of red squares. “The thing is, all the messages came in over the last two days. So I think to myself, what the fuck is going on? So I go and have a chat with these people and the same name keeps coming up again and again. Margritte. Semper-Augustus. Tulipa.” He slapped the cover back over the artefact and tossed it onto his bag. “You don’t normally live here, I know, so I thought I’d explain why this is a pain in the arse. It’s Michaelmas Term. There are Freshers fucking up left, right and centre, new bright young things to scope out, and the university is running at full steam. I don’t appreciate it when most of my college heads decide they have to take time off en masse, especially when the death of the Roses has shafted us good and proper. *Comprende*?”

It took Margritte a moment to filter out what she could from his horrendous speech. “Chancellor—”

“Rupert, please.”

She smiled. “Rupert. I’m sorry this has inconvenienced you but I’m sure you can understand that these are extraordinary circumstances. My husband

was wrongfully accused and murdered in the Londinium Court. My family needs to take action and to do so I only require a few old friends from Oxenford for a couple of weeks at the very most."

"Alex sent me a note saying he might be leaving."

"Might? I told him to resign. He will be taking the throne of Londinium and won't have time for college duties."

Rupert scratched his chin. "Oh, will he? He didn't look so happy just now."

"He's struggling to adjust, but he will."

"Look, Maggie, I'm pretty fucking impressed by you. I want to lay that out on the table because, between you and me, if anyone else tried to pull this off I'd make a pocket realm just for them and a pack of hungry wolves. I understand that your family is upset—"

"Not just my family. Lord Tulip himself."

"Now I couldn't give a flying fuck what Lord Tulip is upset about. What I do give a fuck about is my university and your antics are screwing with it. I don't want to force my people to choose between their duties here and whatever debts they have to you, but if I have to, I will."

Margritte smiled. She would be willing to bet her jewels that he'd already applied that pressure and lost. "It seems we have a problem, then," she said. "Do you have a solution?"

"I do actually." He grinned again. The sliver of meat was still lodged in place. "You're pissed off that there's this Iris lad on the throne instead of your husband, right?"

"That's part of it," she replied coolly.

"So I propose this. You tell your friends here they don't have to run off to Londinium on some crusade. Instead, you write to your old friends back home in the big smoke and invite them to come to Oxenford. There are

several colleges here that could do with some trustworthy family friends to look after them and I'm sure you're capable of identifying which of your Londinium allies would be willing to join us here."

"That would solve *your* problem. What about mine?"

"Well, that's the beauty of it." Rupert dug a fingernail in between his teeth, frowned at what he winkled out and then put it back in his mouth. "The new Duke, unpopular already, starts losing the best people from his Court."

"And their tithes," Margritte said.

"That too. 'Holy shit!' he says, and issues a formal apology to you and your family, begging people to come back. Then his patron sees what a royal mess of it he's made and drags him off to Exilium for a life of slavery."

"Leaving Alexander to take the throne," Margritte finished.

Rupert frowned. "Well, we'll cross that bridge when we come to it. So, we got a deal? You don't fuck up Michaelmas Term for me and I give your old friends a whole lot more power and influence than they'll ever have in Londinium, plus you get to screw over the Iris boy."

Margritte sat back and looked at the marble bust on the mantelpiece behind him. She thought of Bartholomew's kiss and the ache in her chest. Even if it didn't work out the way Rupert said it would, it was better to play the long game and have a Sorcerer on her side. She nodded. "We have a deal, Rupert."

Will fiddled with his new mobile phone as he waited at the café. The sun had almost set and the mundanes were hurrying past in the rush hour. The

cappuccino was nothing like the one he'd had in Rome on his Grand Tour but it was warming at least.

He was hungry, but too tense to eat. He stirred the coffee, looked out of the window and tried not to think about what the corruption of the Arbiters could mean. He would get information first, then draw his conclusions. It was the first rule of managing anxiety: don't speculate.

At least he'd come to a decision about Cathy and her secret life: to leave it well alone. He'd considered challenging her about it but she would only dig her heels in and be stubborn. She'd close herself off from him again and the little progress he'd made before the attack would be lost. The mundane had been warned off her, Carter was going to keep her out of Mundanus anyway and, besides, if he told her he knew, she'd replace the flat and the rest of the arrangements with new ones he knew nothing about. This way, if she did run off, he'd know where to look. If things deteriorated between them he would send one of his people to watch the property, and the Agency were already monitoring the phone line and bank account for any activity. He didn't like having to rely on them but he didn't have anyone in Mundanus with whom he could share such sensitive information.

He just hoped he could win her over and render all the precautions unnecessary. He needed an ally and he needed her to be his wife. And he wanted her to be someone he could trust, no matter how unlikely that seemed.

A couple walked in holding hands and Will felt a pang of jealousy until he spotted a familiar man behind them. Will raised a hand to catch his attention.

The Arbiter approached slowly, scanning the other people in the café. "Let's sit over there," he said, pointing to a corner table at the back.

Will picked up his coffee and followed.

“I was the one who came to the hospital,” the Arbiter said.

“Yes, I remember you.” When a man had a face like a frog it was hard to forget.

“My name is Faulkner.”

Will remembered Cornelius saying his name. Why hadn’t he noticed at the time? “Thank you for coming so promptly. Would you like something to drink?”

The Arbiter shook his head and sat down with his back to the wall. His wide-set eyes scanned the other customers again, the door, the barista and then Will. He studied Will’s mundane garb, what he was drinking and the wedding ring on his finger. “What did you want to see me about?”

Will suppressed the urge to approach the conversation gently. There was no need to win this man over, nor to take any interest in his feelings. He’d been told the Arbiters had none, though he didn’t know why. It was unnerving sitting in a coffee shop with one. It was like looking at a copy of a man, rather than a real person.

“I understand you effectively work for me now.”

“That’s one way to put it.”

“Is there another?”

“I work for you *too*. You’re not the only person I’ll take orders from.”

Will nodded. He suspected that if he asked Faulkner to do something that a Sorcerer disapproved of, the order would be ignored. He wondered what the Arbiter made of it. Wasn’t he effectively doing the exact opposite to what he should? Perhaps he was nothing more than a soldier, happy to follow orders without questioning why. “This is a new situation for me,” he continued. “I wanted to know if this is new for you.”

“I’ve never helped the Irises before, if that’s what you mean.”

“Any other families?”

“Yes. If you want to know if I’ve lied to you, just ask me. This arrangement will be much more efficient if you just state plainly what you want to know and what you want me to do.”

Will appreciated his candour. “Did you lie to me at the hospital?”

“Yes,” Faulkner said. “That was before my new orders arrived. It won’t happen again. Unless something else changes.”

Will’s heartbeat felt like a drum roll in his ears. “I want to know the truth about what happened to my wife. I want to know everything you do about what happened, who told you to lie to me and why.”

“Cornelius White gave me the order to come to the hospital and tell you that Tulipa magic was detected at the scene.”

Will gripped the sides of his chair below the table. Cornelius was involved? After all he’d done for him?

“My Chapter was already aware of a serious attack. I went to the scene before coming to the hospital because it happened in my ward. No Tulipa magic there; it was all Rose. I didn’t expect that, considering what happened to that family, but that’s what I detected. Large amounts; it was either Lady Rose or one of the Thorns. Most probably one of the brothers; she doesn’t get involved with anything bloody. Enough for a powerful Glamour, and there was a strong residue in the bushes, which makes sense. There was a child injured with puncture wounds consistent with thorns.”

“Then you came and told me it was Tulip magic?” Will struggled to keep his anger in check.

“That was my order. Cornelius was very clear.”

“But he told me it was his cousin. He killed him.”

Faulkner nodded. “Standard Rosa technique, I’ve seen it before. Glamour an assassin to look like a fall guy. Commit the crime and, if there are no witnesses, it’s done. But if someone sees, or someone survives, they

give a description and the fall guy is blamed. The cousin either pissed Cornelius off or was just unimportant enough to kill without repercussions from others in the family. What interests me is why the attack failed. From the police report it sounds like there was someone from the Elemental Court there, someone allied to Iron or Iron himself. Your wife has interesting friends, Mr Iris."

But Will was still struggling to understand Cornelius' betrayal. Were old family loyalties playing out? Was it because of the affair with Amelia? His stomach twisted. "Was his sister, Amelia, involved?"

"I can find that out easily enough," Faulkner replied. "I can bring the brother in and question him. I'm assuming you want that?"

Will nodded. "I want to know why. And what else he's done." Bastard, he thought. You bastard. And then he knew he was going to kill him, once he had all he needed from him, and he felt better. The rage had somewhere to go.

"Are you aware you're under the influence of a potent Charm?" Faulkner asked.

"What?"

"Your pupils dilated, your cheeks flushed and your lips went red again when you thought and spoke about Amelia White. Tell-tale signs of a love or lust Charm, probably a mixture of the two."

"I…" Will stammered, struggling to manage nausea as well as his anger.

"Did she engineer repeated exposure over a short period of time shortly after you first met?"

Will pushed his mind back to the beginning of the season in Aquae Sulis. The first moment he saw her on the balcony he'd been attracted to her. "She's very beautiful, it makes sense—"

“Did she make sure she had frequent access to you after you first met?” Faulkner repeated.

The memory of the crush in the hallway at the Peonias’ party flooded back. She’d smelt of rose water and had made his chest almost burst with lust. They’d had tea and he couldn’t stop watching her. Then the meetings to help them integrate into Aquae Sulis, the dinner parties, the way she smiled at him and made it so easy to help her. She was beautiful, but he’d met dozens of beautiful women all over the world and none of them had had the same effect on him.

“Damn it!” Will yelled and smashed his fist against the table. The Whites had played him and he’d lapped it all up. He slept with her on his wedding night! That night of all nights—why didn’t he question his own decision? And the day Cathy was attacked, Amelia lured him up to her room when he’d been set on leaving. If he had left then…

“If you let me take a sample of your hair I can confirm it,” Faulkner said. “From the way you’re acting I assume I don’t need to.”

Will looked up from his fist to see the rest of the people in the café staring at him. “You don’t need to,” he said, twisting away from them and blocking his peripheral vision by resting his head in his hands. There was no one he could trust. Not even Amelia, who he thought loved him. He’d saved her and her brother, given her everything she needed…but even though she’d stolen his senses, it didn’t mean she’d been complicit in the attack. He had to be certain.

“I need to know whether she knew Cathy was in danger,” he said, rummaging in his pocket for his wallet. “I’ll send a message to Cornelius to meet me at Black’s in one hour. You’ll take him into custody there and do whatever it takes to get everything out of him. Free rein.”

“And when I’m finished with him?”

“Report back to me and don’t let him go.” He pulled a fiver out of his wallet and tossed it next to the coffee cup.

“There’s something else,” Faulkner said. “A message for your wife. We’d appreciate it if she were more subtle in her use of Charms in such public places.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“She cast a Charm on the statue of Nelson in Trafalgar Square earlier. It seems she went straight out to test your new authority.”

But he hadn’t even told her yet. Will stood up, masking his ignorance with the movement. “I’ll be sure to tell her.” Why hadn’t Carter stopped her? He’d given explicit instructions. How was he supposed to run Londinium when no one did as they should?

“Anyone else and we would have personally escorted them to the Patroon and pushed for their expulsion from Society.”

“I understand,” Will said. “You can go now.”

He waited until Faulkner had left then went to the nearest underground station, one with multiple entrances and exits. If Faulkner knew where he was it meant the other Arbiters of his Chapter did too, and they might be following him. Whilst he wasn’t afraid of them now, he didn’t want them to know his business.

After a swift detour through the station and out by one of the more crowded exits, Will walked to the Bathurst stables and opened the Way to the Nether reflection. He penned a message and sent the head of the stables to take it to Cornelius. After a brief stop at the Emporium of Things in Between and Besides he instructed the driver to take him to Cornelius and Amelia’s house. The journey gave him time to think it all through and calm down. He’d deal with the Whites first. He needed to root out the lies and make sure that his family was safe. Then he would work out what to do

next. He only had the throne because of betrayal and manipulation, the former by Cornelius, the latter by his own patron. His wife was lying to him and was, it seemed, determined to have herself thrown out of the Nether. He'd been ordered to appoint the wrong man as Marquis and the Court would be against his reign from the start. His temples throbbed. If only he could be back in Sicily again. If only he could be that man running on the shore line, the beautiful girl dancing in and out of the surf ahead of him, with nothing to worry him in the Worlds. Will felt heavy with the knowledge that he could never be that young man again.

When the carriage drew up he slid the feather from its envelope and brushed it across his eyelids, under his nose, across his lips and his earlobes as the Shopkeeper had instructed. He felt no different but had been told it would be so. The protection would last a day and a night. He checked his pocket watch as the footman lowered the step. Cornelius would be in Faulkner's custody by now.

When the door was opened he climbed out. "You're to come inside and wait in the hall," he said to his footmen. They were the same men he'd brought to the house before and, just as they had been then, they were armed.

The front door was opened by the butler who bowed low. Will entered, his men behind him, and asked for Amelia. She was already at the top of the stairs.

"Will!" she called and hurried down. She was dressed in a peach-coloured damask silk and looked bright and healthy. Will appreciated her beauty as one would that of a painting, not as a man in love. As she took each step he became more and more aware of how deeply he'd been in her thrall. There was no need to harden his heart against her because there was nothing real there at all. Memories of being in love with her felt just like

that: memories, something faded and already tarnished. The briefest urge to embrace her felt more of a habit than anything genuine.

“Amelia,” he said and forced himself to smile.

“I’m so delighted to see you. It’s been so long since you last visited!”

He hadn’t been there since the day of the attack. He’d been in Exilium for two weeks then had been at Cathy’s side every spare moment.

She stopped halfway down the staircase, studying his face. Then she curtsied deeply. “Your Grace,” she said and then winked. “Would you be so kind as to wait for me in the drawing room? I’ll be with you in a moment. I’ll have tea sent and…” She fluttered her eyelashes in such an obvious way. “There’s something we need to discuss.”

He was tempted to just have it out with her, then and there, but he wanted to see if she was doing what he suspected.

Tea was brought but he didn’t touch it. Amelia arrived a minute later in a cloud of rosewater scent that sparkled about her, confirming his suspicion. The protective Charm was doing its job well; not only was it preventing its effects, it was showing him when the love Charm was at its strongest. It was likely infused in her scent and when she saw he was different, she’d dashed back to her room and doused herself in it, desperate to have him malleable once more.

“Darling, how naughty of you to send for Cornelius so we could be alone.”

“I wanted to see you by yourself,” he said, standing out of habitual politeness. “There’s something we need to talk about.”

“I beg you to let me speak first. Please.”

So she was going to confess. It would make it easier. She was shrewd and could sense the game was up. “You first then.”

“I’m pregnant.”

It felt as if the floor was falling away in front of him. Could the day get any worse?

Her face fell. “You’re not pleased. Oh…oh, dear.”

“Are you telling the truth, Amelia?”

Her shock appeared genuine. “I would never lie about such a thing! I’m going to give you a son. He’ll be born in July next year. A summer baby.”

A son. From the wrong woman. His guts twisted. “How could this have happened?” he whispered.

“What did you expect?” Amelia said sharply, then drew in a long breath. “Love has its consequences, darling.”

She was looking different. There was a fullness in her cheeks and a pink glow that hadn’t been there before. Her hair was shining. His son was growing inside her. Will looked away.

“Have I lost my appeal?”

He said nothing.

“I thought you’d be pleased. I’m going to give you a handsome and strong son, darling.”

“I know what Cornelius did.” There was a long pause. “And I know what you’ve been doing to me since Aquae Sulis. I’m going to give you one chance to tell me the truth, Amelia. One.” He looked at her. She was sitting rigidly upright, hands clasped in her lap, still enveloped in a sparkling cloud. “Did you know Cornelius was planning to kill my wife?”

She held his gaze, as still as death. “Yes,” she said. “He forced me not to tell you, even though I wanted to, Will. I wanted to warn you.”

Will’s breath felt like it had turned to ice in his throat. He’d expected her to deny it, but she was no fool. She’d realised why Cornelius wasn’t there and why he hadn’t touched her since he arrived. “Why didn’t you?”

“He’s my brother! And I wanted to take her place. I don’t want to be locked away like a private whore. I want to be the wife at your side! She doesn’t deserve you.”

“Catherine has never manipulated me and never conspired to kill another. Don’t you dare imply you are better than her!” Will’s voice rose to a shout. “She’s my wife! You used me, you twisted me up and made me think I loved you when I should have been devoting myself to her!”

“Oh, don’t be so melodramatic.” She smoothed a wrinkle in her silk dress. “You men are all the same. I didn’t need to use a Charm to get your attention. I didn’t force you to come here on your wedding night. You did that all by yourself. You wanted it all; me in the background to satisfy your needs whilst you kept your family happy. Catherine’s so ugly you would have taken a mistress without my involvement.”

He was on his feet. “You will not say another word about my wife. You’re not fit to speak her name. This is how it’s going to be: you won’t see Cornelius again. He will be kept a long way from where the two of you can cook up any more conspiracies and you’ll be sent into Mundanus for the pregnancy. You will be watched twenty-four hours a day and if you do anything that could jeopardise my son’s health, I will have Cornelius killed. If you try to escape or do anything to hurt me or my family, I will have Cornelius killed. He will understand that, if he does anything other than regret his actions, you will be killed. Your mutual good behaviour will ensure each other’s survival. Do you understand?”

She was shaking and her hands twisted the pearls at her throat. “And when your son is born?”

“He’ll be taken from you and will never know your name. You won’t be able to poison him with your ill spirit. You’ll live out the rest of your days in Mundanus.”

“No!” She threw herself forwards and clutched his jacket hem. “Don’t make me old, Will, don’t—”

“Don’t be so melodramatic,” he said as she sobbed. “I could have you sent to the Agency, sold off to a foreign brothel or simply killed. Be grateful that I’m merciful.” He freed himself from her. “I wouldn’t bother,” he said, going to the door. “It doesn’t matter how much you cry, I won’t be moved.”

The tears stopped and she twisted to look at him. “You’re making a mistake, William. She isn’t capable of being a decent Duchess and you know it. Forgive me, forget her and make *me* your wife. I’ll give you everything you could ever need or want from a woman.”

Will smiled sadly and shook his head. “No, you can’t, Amelia. There wouldn’t be any trust.”

He left the room and closed the door behind him. The matter was almost finished. Once he had a full report from Faulkner there would be only one decision left with regard to the former Alba-Rosas: the manner of Cornelius’ death.

8

Sam sat in the doorway of the forge, cradling the cup of tea in his hands. The birds were singing and the breeze was fresh and cool. He wiped his forehead and looked at the grimy sweat on the back of his hand. The only time he'd ever got this dirty through hard work had been the day he'd helped his grandmother clear out an old shed when he was a boy. She was long dead and he hadn't thought about her for years. She was just a collection of fragmented impressions now: blue-rinsed hair, the smell of lavender soap and camphor mothballs, and a jar of pear drops that never seemed to run out. She died when he was seven, the same summer he'd cleared out the shed. He could still remember seeing all the things that he'd pulled out for her on the grass in the back garden when they went back to her house after the funeral. He had no idea what had happened to it all. The house was probably sold and other people lived there now, people who had no idea who she had been.

That was the thing about death, he thought as he sipped the tea. It made everything seem so poignant. He couldn't remember anything now without some reference to it. Leanne was still on his mind for what felt like every minute of the day he wasn't hammering the iron. He knew, intellectually, that his life had once been normal but it was so hard to recall. The bereavement was like the camphor in his grandmother's clothes; it perfused everything and the smell just lingered on and on long after the mothballs were gone.

The heat from the forge felt good on his back. It was like sitting between two worlds, one cold, one hot, and on the threshold between the two was his aching body. He'd become aware of muscles in his arms and back and shoulders that he never knew existed. Iron had hired a masseuse to stay as long as Sam needed her and three times a day she worked the knots out and made him groan in the place between pain and relief. Every day he got up, he walked to the forge and he hit metal all day long.

What surprised him was how much he'd taken to it. He'd never been particularly practical and always avoided the DIY jobs around the house until Leanne got impatient enough to hire a bloke to come and do it for them. He wrote code in front of a screen all day and then most evenings she was out and he played games on another screen. He hadn't looked at a computer or a TV since the funeral. Nothing seemed as real now as standing over the anvil, beating the shit out of lumps of iron.

He finished the tea and set the mug down. He stood and stretched, worked a crick out of his right shoulder and decided that once the piece he was working on was finished, he'd open the letter Leanne had left him.

Cathy took her seat in the carriage as Will spoke to the footmen. It reminded her of when they'd been newly married; she was dressed far more extravagantly than she'd ever choose for herself and feeling sick with nerves. Will didn't seem nervous on the outside, but he was more withdrawn than usual. She'd hardly seen him in the week since he gave her the library and it felt like the little moments of closeness they'd had were distant memories. But she was used to feeling awkward. In fact, it was comforting and the less at ease with each other they were, the less likely the chance of pregnancy.

“Would you like me to ride in the carriage with you, your Grace?” Carter asked him. Cathy sighed. Carter was a nice enough man, from what she could tell, but Will still hadn’t dismissed him even though he knew Thorn couldn’t attack her again.

“Take the place of the second footman,” Will replied and Carter obeyed. The carriage rocked when he climbed onto the back.

Sophia came running out of the front door calling Will’s name for a last-minute goodbye. As he embraced her, Cathy ran through her mental checklist: arrive, smile, say nothing stupid, swear oath to the city, survive the first Court, don’t trip over anything and avoid the food. “I can do this,” she whispered to herself. “I can do this.” She groaned. Lucy’s advice wasn’t working. Perhaps positive self-affirmations were for Californians only. Perhaps the sarcasm and perpetual doubt wired into her British brain had made her immune to such tricks.

Will opened the door and climbed in, laying his top hat on the seat next to him. He was dressed in a rather austere Victorian-style morning suit with a deep blue cravat and waistcoat embroidered with subtle fleur-de-lys. It was the same colour as the trim on her dress, also in the late Victorian style and high-necked to cover the scar.

There was no more pain, thanks to some salve sent by Dame Iris. It was an expensive gift, the nurse had told her, and, whilst Cathy didn’t want to accept it, she knew the Dame would be informed of her recovery. The note sent with it had said Dame Iris was delighted to receive the invitation to the first Court of William’s Dukedom and hoped the salve would make the evening easier for her. It hadn’t fooled Cathy; no doubt there was another agenda at play, as there always was with Dame Iris.

Will knocked on the roof of the carriage and they pulled off. Cathy waved to Sophia, who was sitting on her uncle’s shoulders and waving a

lace handkerchief. Cathy hadn't told anyone that every time she looked at Sophia she saw the thorns about her neck and felt the pain in her hands again. It wouldn't make the memories fade any faster.

"We're not going directly to the Tower," Will said. "Don't worry, we're just taking a more circuitous route."

"Are you worried about another attack?"

"I discussed it with Carter. It's best to be unpredictable." He looked at her properly for the first time. "I like your gown. How are you feeling?"

"Fine," she replied, resisting the temptation to make a comment about what he'd said to her before: "If you're well enough to gallivant around London causing chaos, you're well enough to be Duchess."

For a few minutes they sat in silence. She wanted to tell him about Bennet, but merely taking a breath to start made her cough. The curse was too strong. After a brief concerned look, Will stared out of the window into the mists, his mind evidently far away from the carriage. "Are you still angry?" she asked. "About the Animation Charm?"

It took him a moment to look at her with any focus. "What?"

"Because, like I said, I'm sorry. I should have done something more subtle."

"It's behind us now."

He'd been furious but it wasn't anything like her father's rage. Where her father rattled like a pot filled with boiling water before blowing up and beating her, Will just got colder and asked piercing rhetorical questions to make her feel like a total idiot. He accepted that both she and Carter had had to do as the Arbiter had asked but he still made the point that she could have chosen something that wouldn't have caused a viral YouTube hit. And he was right, she hadn't been thinking like an Iris. She hadn't considered the family and the impact it could have on their reputation. She'd had the

feeling there was a lot more on his mind than he'd said but she hadn't wanted to draw it out any longer. She'd learned from her father that it was best to admit fault and apologise to make the storm pass as quickly as possible.

She didn't actually regret any of it, but she had to get him on side if she was going to achieve any real change in her new role. Will was looking out of the window again. He was so quiet. "Are you nervous?" she asked and he shook his head.

"I don't get nervous about things like this," he replied. "Everyone knows what they're supposed to do and when."

"But what about after the ceremony?"

"What about it?"

"Well…that's not scripted."

It was one of the many, many things that terrified her about the evening ahead. Small talk was bad enough but small talk with absolutely everyone watching and paying attention? She couldn't imagine a social situation harder than that. She started to shake and clasped her gloved hands tight on her lap. It all seemed too soon. Once Will had decided she was ready to be sworn in, the huge social machine had gone into motion. Poor Tom had only just moved to the city and had had less than a week to come to terms with the new position. He'd still looked pale when she saw him that morning to go over the last details of the ceremony.

"You're more capable than you think," Will said. "Remember, you're the Duchess. You don't have to seek their approval. They should be seeking yours."

"I'm only Duchess because I'm married to you, not because I'm better than them."

"Irrelevant," Will replied.

She wanted to bite her nails but they were trapped under silk fingertips. “What if someone says something about the new venue?”

“What are you worried they’ll say?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. I think Tom had a point.”

“Your brother’s an academic, he sees things differently.”

“No, I think he was talking sense. The Tower was built to crush the rowdy Londoners and lots of people know that.”

“Somerset House was built to run an Empire that only exists in the Nether now,” Will replied. “It reminds everyone of what we’ve lost in Mundanus. Everywhere has a history. And the White Tower is perfect for us. Lord Iris himself made its reflection in the Nether and it was the first property in Londinium. The Rosas never used it because of its Iris roots but we can feel safer there than in any building they commissioned.”

“Oh, come on.” Cathy wasn’t willing to be fobbed off. “I’m not stupid, Will. Your ancestor—your namesake—had that Tower built for a specific reason. It’s a statement.”

“Is that a problem?”

“Is it really the kind of statement you want to make? ‘The Iris family will crush any resistance just like the good old Normans did’ is a bit…I don’t know…brutal, isn’t it?”

“A strong statement is the best way to begin a new reign.”

“You don’t have to distance yourself from Bartholomew this much, though.” The brief creasing between his eyebrows showed her she’d struck a nerve. “It wasn’t your fault. If you’d known what that bastard Cornelius did, you never would have duelled Bartholomew. You only acted on the information you had at the time. You thought you were doing the right thing.”

“Did I?”

She found it hard to remember the warmth she'd seen in him. When he told her what the Whites had done, he'd shaken with rage, and he hadn't been anything but tense since then.

"Will," she said softly, leaning across the gap to take his hands, "why don't we tell Margritte what happened? She has a right to know and you need to be free of this guilt. His name should be cleared."

"We've been through this," he said but he didn't push her away. "If anyone else finds out what happened they could argue I have no right to the throne."

"But it doesn't change the fact you won the duel and that's why you have the throne, not because of what you thought he did."

"It changes the reason why I challenged him and then I'd be known as the fool who's easy to trick. And not only me; Lord Iris would be seen as fallible too and that is simply unacceptable. He wants me to rule here and that's what I must do. He didn't want me to just take the throne, Cathy, he wants me to keep it." He squeezed her hands. "Don't tell anyone. Swear it to me."

"I just don't think that—"

"Swear it!"

She saw the fear in his eyes and felt the desperation in his touch. The guilt was chewing him up inside. It wasn't the time to talk about Bartholomew's honour. "I won't tell anyone," she said, but there was no relief in his eyes. "You can trust me, Will."

"Can I?"

She knew that feeling. She'd tasted that fear, that need to have someone on her side and how bitter it was to be alone. A thousand times in her childhood she'd looked for someone who'd stop her father's violence but there was no one willing to help her. Tom was just as frightened of him, and

her mother and sister didn't care. She knew the loneliness of struggling to find a way out, not being able to tell a soul of her plans and the sheer terror of seeing them through. He didn't want to be Duke, she could see that, no matter how hard he tried to look like he was born into the role. He was only avoiding Lord Iris' wrath, as they all were. The system held him as tightly as it held her and she didn't want him to feel that he was just as alone as she had felt.

"Will, I want to tell you something but I don't want you to freak out or anything until I've finished, all right?"

He gave a single nod, still holding her hands as tightly as she held his.

"I was planning to leave you. I was trying to find a way back to Mundanus with enough protections so that Iris couldn't find me. I managed to hide from Poppy before, for a couple of years before the engagement was announced. That's why everything was so tense at the first ball in Aquae Sulis; my family only just managed to get me back before you came home. I wanted to do it again. That's why I was so angry with you for wanting to marry sooner. But I'm not going to try to run away again."

He felt like he was really there with her for the first time since they left the house, staring deep into her eyes as if searching for something. "Why not?"

"Because I want to change Society rather than run away from it. And I've been thinking about being Duchess and it scares the living shit out of me and I'd rather go and live with my parents again than have to be on show in the Court but I've started to think this might be a chance to change things."

"What things?"

"How women are treated, for a start. Look, in Mundanus everything changed in the last hundred years or so because of external factors like the

world wars and the industrial revolution and all kinds of other stuff. But in the Nether there aren't the same pressures. It's a closed system that endlessly propagates itself, do you see? People aren't supposed to live for hundreds of years and the way they think isn't supposed to dominate for as long as it does here. It's a stagnant pond, so we have to change it from within. We could do that. Together."

She held her breath as she waited for his response. She hadn't planned to raise it then even though she'd tried to think of a way to bring up the topic so many times and in so many different ways.

He kissed her gloves, closing his eyes as he did so. "I don't want you to leave me. I can't do this by myself and I can't keep worrying that you're not on my side."

"But I am, Will. I can see you're not like the others. You've respected my wishes and not forced yourself on me and I really do appreciate that, I do. I've met Iris, I know how scary he is and I know he's putting you under pressure too."

He pulled a hand away to curl it behind her neck, pulling her in to kiss her. "I haven't been a perfect husband. I'll try harder. And thank you for being honest with me."

"If we can't trust each other this is all going to fall apart," she said. "I'm not sure I even know how to really be with you, but I want to try now. I want to make things different and I need you to be on my side too. Are you?"

This time she was searching his face for something to cling to. He broke eye contact, bringing her hands together in her lap and closing his own over them to hold them tight. "We can't do anything radical. Not yet, Cathy. We have to establish ourselves, we have to have a child and we have to survive.

We can’t do anything outside of what’s expected of us or we’ll draw even more attention and we don’t need that now.”

“But we’ll be the most powerful couple in Londinium—who better to lead by example? Who better to start a dialogue and bring these issues into the public consciousness than us?”

He shook his head. “No. The Patroon wouldn’t support this and neither would the Dame.”

“Fuck them!” Cathy balled her fists beneath his hands as he winced. “They’re part of the system—of course they won’t like it. That’s the point!”

“Cathy, listen to me. We need to secure our position here. We need to make alliances and deal with the mess I made—that Cornelius made. We can’t think about anything else and we can’t make it harder by bringing in another agenda that will alienate the very people we need to bring on side. There’s too much to lose.”

“But that’s exactly why nothing ever changes here—because people are scared. Don’t you see what we could gain by having a Society with women contributing as much as men? We’re wasted on bloody embroidery and taught to worry about what we look like all the sodding time. And it sucks for the men too! You don’t have any real freedom either. It could be so much better.”

“I agree, but we have to protect our own interests. If we try to change things like this without being in a strong position then we’ll destroy ourselves without achieving anything.”

She took a breath to argue back but reconsidered. They were on their way to the first test of his Dukedom, it wasn’t the right time. She’d find a way to bring him round and in the meantime she had the other names in Miss Rainer’s file to track down. There were allies out there, she was certain.

Will was still holding her hands, their foreheads were almost touching. He smelt of vanilla and musk and she wanted to kiss him but she didn't dare. "I admire your ambition and your passion but you need to redirect it, my love," he said. "We mustn't forget that Iris expects a son in the first year of our marriage."

"Haven't you wondered why?"

"He always wants sons in every generation. Everyone does."

"But why the rush? We're going to be together for hundreds of years. It's not like we're racing the menopause."

"I…I don't know."

"And why were we paired off in the first place? I mean, it's madness. If this was just about sealing an alliance between the Papavers and Irises, they'd have married Nathaniel to my sister. They're perfect for each other. You're leagues above me. When you were eligible they could have married any daughter they wanted into your line. Someone beautiful, someone hugely wealthy or strategically important but no, they marry you to me. The misfit. The ugliest girl in Aquae Sulis."

"Cathy—"

"No, it's true. There has to be a reason and it's something to do with the child we'd have together, I'd bet money on it. Why else do it?"

He frowned to himself and then shook his head. "I don't know. But it doesn't change anything. And surely it wasn't so bad before?"

She leaned back. "It isn't that I don't want you, Will, really." She tried not to laugh. "That's not the problem. I just can't allow myself to get pregnant."

"Why? Every woman—"

"No," she cut in. "Don't you dare say that's what every woman wants. My father said that on the morning of our wedding and I could've punched

him. I just don’t see myself as a mother and besides, there’s no way in hell I’d want to bring a child into our Society.”

“Why ever not? Our child would want for nothing.”

“Except the freedom to do whatever they want. Come on, Will, think about it. I’m not going to bring a girl into this world to be sold off as property and I’m not going to raise a son to think that’s all women are good for. It just isn’t right.”

“It doesn’t matter how we might feel about it. Consider the consequences of disobeying Lord Iris.”

“But what are the real consequences of giving him what he wants? For all we know, he may have plans for any son we might have.”

“But he’ll get what he wants, one way or another. There are a hundred different ways he could force this to happen. Let’s not open ourselves to that kind of misery.” He released her hands and cupped her face in his. His kiss was tender and deep. “Let’s make a child the right way, without anything else interfering.”

Cathy cursed the way her body betrayed her, and the fact that he wasn’t listening to her. He didn’t really understand why she didn’t want it to happen. He was just frightened of Iris and, whilst she was too, she was determined to keep her body her own for as long as she could.

The carriage was slowing down. “Oh, shit,” she whispered. “We’re there.”

9

As soon as they entered the room, Will knew he'd made the right decision in moving the Court's location. The ducal thrones had been reupholstered to the Iris blue and a golden fleur-de-lys was set into the top of the chair backs. The room was smaller than the one at Somerset House but it was still large enough for the assembled and there were many other rooms in the White Tower more suited to dances and dinners. He was even considering moving the family there. The thick stone walls were reassuring and it felt right to be in a place created by the man he'd been named after. It had a different sense of grandeur, one older and with more gravitas than the stuccoed reminders of Empire. These walls had seen over a thousand years of power and it felt right to weave his reign into that ongoing history.

He cast his eye over the room as people relaxed and conversed after the tight formality of the ceremony. All had gone to plan. Tom had hidden his nerves well and actually looked the part. He had the same military posture as his father, even though Tom had never served. As far as Will knew he hadn't even been on his Grand Tour.

Lucy, his wife, seemed happy and supportive and in fact the only one of their family who seemed utterly delighted with Tom's change in status. He watched her accompany Tom around the room, moving from introduction to introduction with ease and warmth.

Sir Iris had said his goodbyes after the ceremony was over, leaving Dame Iris to stay for the rest of the evening. Whilst Cathy had barely been able to hide her dismay at the news the Dame would be staying, Will was

glad. The Dame would no doubt dissect the evening with Cathy at one of their meetings and help her to read the politics of the room. He was glad his Patroon had elected to make his excuses. It was an awkward situation; Will was the most powerful man in the city and now one of the highest-status Irises in Albion—above even his father—but the Patroon was still the head of the family. It was hard to be deferential to his authority whilst trying to stamp his own on the room and he appreciated the tact demonstrated by leaving him as the only high-ranking male Iris there. The Dame, whilst still someone he would obey without question, didn't cause the same problems with visible pecking order.

Dame Iris was talking to Georgiana, Freddy Viola's wife, who was doing her best to extricate herself from the inevitable social disaster he would cause when drunk. Will recalled his appalling behaviour at the dinner party the Tulipas hosted when they first moved to Londinium, and Cathy's fork-based solution.

He glanced at Cathy and checked that she was managing her nerves. She was gripping the arms of her throne rather tightly but no one else would be able to see that and thankfully her presumably white knuckles were hidden by her gloves. They only had to sit there for a few minutes longer before they could leave the dais and mingle. Not that it would be a consolation to her, but being stuck there with everyone watching was rather odd.

He'd offered the room the opportunity to come and speak with them with any pressing matters that were of importance to the city as a whole before the proceedings became less formal. No one had approached them yet and he hoped no one would. He just wanted this evening to be simple so that Cathy could see that nothing terrifying would happen. Over time she'd get used to it, he was certain. At least she was trying her best; if she hadn't

had the change of heart she'd confessed in the carriage it could be so much worse. He brushed the baby finger of her right hand and she looked at him, alert and ready to be tested. He just smiled and with palpable relief she returned it. If you meant what you said in the carriage, he thought, we could not only survive this, we could thrive.

Then Freddy's voice cut through the moment. "That's terrible!" he boomed. He'd been relatively quiet up until that point and in all the places Will expected him to cause trouble he'd been mercifully silent. But now there was a glass of wine in his hand and a familiar red flush across his nose and cheeks.

He was talking to Mr Lutea-Digitalis, the former Marquis. He'd seemed relieved to be released from the post, knowing it would be a difficult position to hold in a hostile Court. Had he planned to cause trouble with Freddy?

Freddy's younger brother crossed the room swiftly and spoke to his elder. Will noted how different they were and how hard the younger was working to try and contain Freddy's outburst. He watched the room divide between those who thought it best to ignore Viola's latest bout of hot air and those who enjoyed good social sport. Georgiana excused herself from Dame Iris and went over as Freddy said, "But this is something you should take to the Duke. This is something that affects all of us!"

When Georgiana tried to speak to him he brushed her off and then told his younger brother to leave it all to him. Freddy planted a hand between Digitalis' shoulders and propelled him through the parting crowd to the foot of the dais.

"Something you need to hear. Your Grace," he added a beat later.

Will looked expectantly at Digitalis. "Is there something wrong?"

“My wife and I were robbed yesterday whilst travelling on the Nether road between Somerset House and our residence.”

Now everyone was paying attention. “Were you hurt?” Cathy asked.

“No, your Grace, thankfully,” he replied as his wife joined his side, as crimson as her dress. “When I saw their weapons I decided it was best to hand over what they demanded so we would be left with our lives.”

“Our driver was struck,” his wife said. She looked quite distressed at the memory of it. “He has a black eye, poor chap.”

“I’m very sorry to hear of this,” Will said.

“Being sorry doesn’t do any bloody good,” Freddy said.

“It isn’t the Duke’s fault, Freddy,” Digitalis hissed. “Thank you, your Grace.”

“He might not have been the robber but he’s responsible for our safety, isn’t he?” Freddy turned to address the room. “That includes the roads, surely?”

Tom stepped forwards. “Actually, it does not. There are no edicts, documents or records of any previous Dukes adopting responsibility for the roads between Nether properties and the location of the Court.”

“Oh, read them all, have you?” Freddy scoffed.

“Actually I have,” Tom replied, impressively calm. “As Marquis, it’s my role to know such things, as I’m sure Mr Digitalis is aware.”

“Yes, I am very aware of it,” Digitalis spoke with obvious irritation towards Freddy. “Do stop making such a fuss. There have been highwaymen preying upon Londinium for hundreds of years and the Duke has only just taken office. It seems rather unreasonable to expect him to remove a problem the Rosas couldn’t solve in all that time.”

The old faultlines in the Court were being laid bare; the Violas were rich but they weren’t socially successful, thanks to Freddy’s lack of self-control.

Will noted the younger brother's baleful stare at the back of Freddy's head.

It seemed Freddy hadn't anticipated the lack of support either. "Well, seeing as everything's changing, why not make another?" He turned back to look at Will. "Of course the Rosas didn't solve the problem, they were lazy, corrupt and didn't give a toss about anyone except themselves. I was pleased to see a new Duke on the throne. Someone I knew could make the kind of changes Londinium has needed for hundreds of years."

He meant Bartholomew. Freddy was no fool, as much as he liked to make people think he was. Will knew he was trying to back him into a corner and make him promise to do something, fearful of being seen as less capable of change than Bartholomew. For anyone else it would be madness, but Freddy didn't know about the power he had over the Arbiters. It would be a risk but, if he could pull it off, it would silence any doubters.

"Change is a powerful thing and I agree that the problem has existed far too long," he said. "I take my responsibilities as Duke very seriously and believe it's an omission to declare the Nether roads outside of my protection. Without them there is no city to speak of. Let it be entered into the record that my first promise to you as Duke of Londinium is to make the roads between your homes and the White Tower safe to travel in the Nether. I will not have any person within my domain be afraid to travel. I can't say how long it will take, nor can I say it will be without its setbacks and difficulties. But I will deal with the highwaymen and give the residents of this domain the security they deserve."

There was a spontaneous burst of applause and he couldn't resist a quick glance at Dame Iris to gauge her reaction. She too was clapping politely but her expression was inscrutable.

Freddy was easy to read. He made a couple of gruff comments which were inaudible above the applause and then downed the contents of his

glass. His younger brother, standing behind him, moved aside with obvious contempt when Freddy launched himself back into the crowd to find more wine. He made eye contact with Will and bowed deeply. Interesting, Will thought. The younger Viola is someone to watch.

Max got off the train at Bath Spa, having delivered the package to Catherine. It contained several files on people she'd requested after their abortive attempt to get a London Arbiter to come and talk to her. He'd pulled them from the Agency without mentioning it to Ekstrand, something the gargoyle had talked him into.

He couldn't request a messaging tube from Ekstrand without having to explain and he couldn't use the Letterboxer Charm she'd suggested. He proposed a dead drop location that she could send a servant to, but she didn't trust any of them enough. She even seemed nervous of them.

Max spent a couple of hours patrolling the city centre but saw nothing suspicious. There could be people disappearing into Exilium all over the kingdom of Wessex for all he knew. They were blind without the information network the Bath Chapter used to manage and there was no one on the street day in, day out like they needed. They were failing in their duty of care and it had to be the same all over Albion, apart from Mercia. It was only a matter of time before the Fae noticed.

He'd been trying to speak to Ekstrand for almost a week, sending messages via Petra and Axon but receiving nothing in reply. The gargoyle was constantly on edge and had begun to wear a groove in the floorboards of Max's bedroom from the endless pacing. No progress was being made and Ekstrand was the problem.

Satisfied that nothing untoward was happening in the centre, Max headed back to Ekstrand's house. The gargoyle was waiting for him in the lobby and ran up to him like a dog who'd been shut up in a house alone all day. "Ekstrand's come out of his room!" it said. "He's in the ballroom with the apprentices!"

The gargoyle bounded down the hallway ahead of him before running back and then on again as if it had too much energy. As he approached the ballroom Max could hear Ekstrand's voice clearly through the door.

He knocked once and then entered, the gargoyle at his heels. The apprentices were gathered and looking down at something covered by a dark cloth in the middle of the room. Ekstrand was standing next to it dressed in a tweed suit with leather patches on the elbows.

"What sort of things could the Sorcerer of Mercia have neglected to ward his property against? Be creative now."

Gordon, the most enthusiastic apprentice, bobbed up and down with his hand in the air. Ekstrand pointed at him.

"Small mammals, sir."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Guinea pigs…hamsters, that sort of thing."

"No." Ekstrand cut him off. "Bombarding the Sorcerer's house with… otters is not creative, it's absurd. He will have warded against projectiles, even living ones. Next!"

"Acid," another suggested.

"Rubbish," Ekstrand said. "Is that the best you can all come up with? Acid is first on my list of things to ward my property against, not just because my list is alphabetical. The first things that spring to any Sorcerer's mind are destructive substances, so of course he'll have protected against

all of them, including fire, ice—and jellied eels, before anyone suggests that foul substance."

"Sir," Max called from the back. "I must speak with you."

"Not now, Maximilian, I'm in the middle of an important lesson."

"But sir, it's about the Sorcerer of Mercia."

All of the apprentices turned to look at him.

Ekstrand held up a hand. "You're far behind me. I've been going through some old notes and I've already found out something desperately important about him. Well, two things actually. No, three. Three, yes. The first is his name: Rupert! I knew it was something that sounded like a currency, and I was right."

"Will that be useful for fighting him, sir?" Gordon asked.

"That his name sounds like Rupee? No, of course not."

"No, sir, knowing his name."

"Oh. No, not at all, but it was bothering me. Now the second thing I found in my clearing out was a notebook in which I wrote two very important lists. One is a list of places I would like to visit one day. The other—more important for the war—is a list of places I never, ever want to visit. And do you know what's at the top of the list?" When Max, the gargoyle and the apprentices shook their heads in unison he said, "Oxford."

He beamed at them all. No one had anything to say for a moment until Gordon said, "Oh! Oxford is in the kingdom of Mercia!"

Ekstrand nodded. "I started that list a long time ago, I remember writing that city down after I had a rather difficult Moot at which we were all discussing the civil war. Rupert was defending his decision to let the royal Court convene in Convocation House and the Sorcerer of Northumbria was furious about it. They shouted for hours until Rupert said something along the lines of it being his property, in his domain, so he could do what he

wanted there. I had completely forgotten until I saw that list. Convocation House is one of the rooms in the Bodleian Library quadrangle. I'd wager the library is his anchor property too. It's certainly one of the largest in central Oxford, the only one that could contain his monstrous ego."

"But surely he wouldn't give away the location of his home, sir," Max said. All Sorcerers were fiercely protective of their privacy, especially with each other.

"Ah, but he wasn't thinking about such things at the time. He wasn't being careful at all. Of course, there's every possibility that he lives somewhere else now, given it was several hundred years ago, but it's the best place to start."

"What was the third thing?" the gargoyle asked. "You said you found three."

"Did I? Oh. I can't remember. It'll come back to me. So you see, Maximilian, I know everything I need to know about that ne'er-do-well."

"But sir, I don't think he's behind the attack on the Moot."

Ekstrand blinked rapidly. "Preposterous. Rupert of Mercia is a villain from an order of pond scum so low it hasn't even made it into any phyllotactic classification of plant life. He killed the others to take over Albion, as he's always wanted."

"But everything points to the Sorcerer of Essex."

"Dante's dead!"

"Exactly!" the gargoyle said. "He was already dead when the others were murdered. Petra told us that."

"Thereby making it impossible for it to have been him," Ekstrand replied. "So it must be Rupert. I didn't kill them and they wouldn't want to kill themselves—at least not in such a sociable manner—so it has to be Rupert."

“Fae magic can animate inanimate objects and make them behave in a way the caster of the Charm expects,” Max said. “Someone must have animated Dante’s dead body so the other Sorcerers would be tricked long enough to be killed, a way that the wards couldn’t protect against. The only people who could have access to his dead body are one of his apprentices or someone from the Essex Chapter—which we already know is corrupt.”

“But that doesn’t change the fact that Rupert didn’t go to the Moot!” Ekstrand said, his right index finger pointing up at the ceiling. “Why? Because he had to stay outside to cast the foul magic on the building.”

Max could hear the gargoyle’s stone teeth grinding with frustration. Ekstrand simply wasn’t applying logic to the evidence. “No, sir, I believe he may have stayed away for the exact same reason as you; he suspected foul play. His absence from that meeting isn’t enough to place him under suspicion.”

“Yes, it is.” Ekstrand folded his arms. “He’s been planning this for years, I know he has. It all started with killing my Chapter. Not anyone else’s—mine. Why? Because he’s always coveted Wessex and wanted to weaken me!”

“No, sir.” Max shook his head. “I think the Chapter was destroyed by someone from London—it only happened after I discovered the corruption there. That’s where our efforts should be focused. Not Mercia.”

“There’s only a tiny amount of effort left to spend on dealing with Rupert,” Ekstrand said. “Then once he’s gone I can turn my mind to other matters without fearing for my life.”

“But sir—”

“Enough.” Ekstrand held a hand up at him. “You’re defending him too much. Should I be concerned about corruption in the remnants of my own Chapter?”

The gargoyle gasped. “You crazy son of a bitch!” it yelled. “You’re supposed to be calm and clever and look at facts without emotional crap and look at you! You’re obsessed with this Rupert bloke when the rest of the country is going to shit because of something going down in London! London, not the sodding Midlands!”

For a few moments Ekstrand didn’t say anything, he just stood with wide eyes and lips pressed so tight together it looked like his mouth had disappeared. “You,” he said, so quietly the apprentices leaned forwards en masse to listen, “will not speak another word in my presence or I will destroy you and the shell left behind. Get out.”

The gargoyle looked at Max who pointed at the door. Ekstrand wasn’t going to listen and there was nothing he could do about it. He had the briefest flash of seeing the gargoyle leaping at him and some nebulous idea of a coup but it unravelled in the cold light of good sense. The gargoyle slinked out silently, its tail between its legs, chin so low it was almost scraping the floor.

“Now, let’s move on,” Ekstrand said as Max backed away until he was pressed against the wall by the door, watching silently. “We’ve wasted enough time so I’ll give you the answer. The one thing Rupert will not have protected himself against is protection itself and that is how I am going to kill him. I will protect him from the very things he needs to survive.”

10

“Maggie!” Rupert waved to her from the door at the far end of the Divinity Schools, one of the many parts of the Bodleian Library she’d never visited before. As she walked towards him she glanced up at the beautiful medieval ceiling, covered with carved stone bosses reflected from the anchor property.

He beckoned to her and then went ahead into Convocation House, a place she’d heard was much plainer in design but with just as much historical significance, especially for the mundanes. Whilst she knew there would be less grandeur, Margritte didn’t expect a mezzanine floor constructed out of glass and steel cable. It was one of the greatest crimes to interior design she’d ever witnessed. The new floor severed the remarkable interior of Convocation House in two, breaking all of the lines that the medieval architecture naturally drew to the eye. The bright electric—electric!—lighting was harsh to her eyes and made her squint. It was like stumbling into a sliver of Mundanus in the centre of Oxenford and she didn’t like it one bit. The main floor space below was divided into different areas, one containing large sofas and a fireplace that seemed to hang from the ceiling in a most unnerving manner. There was an area filled with strange machines, only one of which resembled anything she could understand: a bicycle without proper wheels. She wondered if all Sorcerers had such appalling taste.

“What do you think?” He threw his arms out open and wide.

“It’s certainly not what I expected.”

“I’ve got a generator out the back. I don’t know what you people have against electricity, it’s fantastic stuff. Come up and I’ll show you my den.”

Den? He made it sound like an animal’s nest. She stopped at the bottom of the stairs, also made of glass, that seemed to float at the side of the room. She couldn’t see how they were attached to the wall and had no idea how they could be strong enough to take her weight. He laughed at the way she tested the bottom step.

“They’re safe—they’re cantilevered through the wall. I went to a gallery in Mundanus that had them and just had to have the same here. No sorcery, I promise. Not for the steps anyway.”

Margritte lifted the front of her black skirts and climbed the steps with care. Most of the wall facing her as she arrived on the upper floor was covered by three massive screens. The two on the outer edges were displaying pieces of art, some of which she recognised, fading from one to the next every few seconds. The screen in the centre was black. A huge desk filled one corner, covered with paper, and with something she thought might be a computer sitting on top of it. She remembered seeing one in a mundane catalogue a friend’s son had brought back from his Grand Tour. She and Bartholomew had looked through it late into the night, marvelling at how grotesque things had become in Mundanus. The computer on the desk bore only a slight resemblance; it was smaller and white and almost elegant in design.

Two reclining chairs made of black leather faced the screens and there were shelves of books filling the rest of the wall space. He watched her take it all in, a big grin plastered across his face. “You should see yourself.” He laughed. “Maggie in Wonderland.”

“Is this why you invited me over? To marvel at your mundane toys?”

He was wearing baggy jeans and a hooded top. Margritte was certain it was the same one he'd been wearing the first time they met. He gestured at one of the chairs. "So you wrote to your friends in Londinium then."

"Yes." She sat down and, before she could stop herself, slid down until the seat back moulded itself to her. Rupert pressed something at the side of the chair and she squeaked as it tipped back a few degrees and the lower front part rose into the air until she was almost lying down. It felt most improper. He jumped into the chair next to her.

"These are the best chairs you can get in Mundanus," he said and opened a compartment in the arm of his chair that she hadn't even noticed. He pulled out a can. "Beer?"

"I think not."

"Oh. Don't drink?"

"I drink wine, Rupert. Not ale."

He laughed. "Sorry. I'll remember that for next time." He angled his chair back as far as hers. "One of your friends visited today. I had one of my favourite students from the university give him a tour of the town."

The plan was working. "That's excellent news. Who was it?"

"Freddy Persificola-Viola. There is no fucking way that twat is going anywhere near any of my colleges."

Margritte sighed. "Did he offend you?"

"Not in person, I didn't meet the guy. No one knows about me until they become part of the university, otherwise it's a hard secret to keep. I made an exception for you."

"Because I was causing you such a headache?"

"Because you're exceptional."

Was he trying to win her favour? Surely not whilst she was still in mourning. But then he had the manners of a savage; he probably didn't

even know that it was unacceptable. She shouldn't really have come to his residence alone. But she was a widow, not a debutante. "Did Freddy offend someone else?"

"Worse," he replied. "I'll show you."

Ekstrand pulled away the cloth with a flourish, revealing a small cannon. "And this is how it will be done."

Max was still pressed against the back wall, doing his best to not draw attention to himself. If he still had a Chapter Master he'd be seeking him out. He had no idea if there had ever been a situation in which a Sorcerer was deemed unfit to hold his post but it was irrelevant now. There was no superior to take his concerns to and no one to enforce an intervention even if it were possible.

"But sir," Gordon was saying. "Whilst I have every confidence in your ability to make a cannon powerful enough to send a shot all the way to Oxford, how would it be possible to calculate the trajectory? Only some of the variables would be known and the risk to mundane lives would be high, too."

Max considered going to warn Rupert but there were several problems, aside from the fact that he would have to truly betray the man he was sworn to serve. The first was that it would be very difficult to even reach the Bodleian. He'd heard from colleagues at the Chapter that the city of Oxford was one of the most tightly controlled in Albion. Nothing happened without the Arbiters there finding out and responding in minutes—they were rumoured to be the most successful Chapter in the Heptarchy. Secondly, even if it were possible to get to Rupert, how could he convince him of the

threat? And there was always the possibility—even though it seemed incredibly remote—that Ekstrand was right.

Rupert's best chance was that Ekstrand's unravelling sanity would make him incapable of striking an effective blow against him. There had been many sorcerous wars in the past but all were before his lifetime and he had no idea if Ekstrand had ever formally battled with any of the other Sorcerers when they were alive.

"Firing from outside my house in Bath would be a truly idiotic thing to do," Ekstrand said. "Really, Gordon, I do wonder why you're here sometimes. No. I've used mundane maps to calculate the exact distance between my garden and the Bodleian Library quadrangle. I'm going to open a Way and fire it through."

Max stopped doubting whether Ekstrand was capable enough. It might only be on a couple of days of the week at most, but on those days he was still brilliant.

"This cannonball—" Ekstrand hefted one up from beside the cannon "—is inscribed with warding formulae." He held it out to Gordon. "If you can't interpret any of the variables your apprenticeship is over."

The young man pored over it for a few seconds. "This is true genius, Mr Ekstrand."

"Are you stalling?"

"No, sir. There are several strings of formulae. I can see one that would change the composition of the cannonball when it hits stone, changing it to something like…clay—to stick! And here, that's to make it blend into its surroundings so it's hard to find. When embedded into a building it would activate wards for the entire Nether structure against nitrogen, oxygen and several trace elements. In other words, air. This one…" He bit his lip. "I think it would force carbon dioxide into the structure—something he can't

have warded against because it’s a natural by-product of breathing. And this here…a ward against silver for the entire structure. Now that’s devilish. And this clause renders the external and internal doors incapable of being opened and the windows from being opened or broken, so it would seal the building completely. The Sorcerer of Mercia would suffocate to death.”

“*Will* suffocate to death,” Ekstrand said. “Grammar should never be overlooked.”

11

Rupert pointed a slender black chunk of something like Bakelite at the central screen and an image of the Oxford High Street appeared with the back of Freddy's head at the centre of the shot.

"You have to understand I can't let one of the Fae-touched just wander around the city without being watched."

She nodded. "I do. Especially when it's Freddy. The person who followed him took pictures without him noticing?"

"More than that." He pressed something on the Bakelite and the image started to move. The sound of cars and sirens blared out of nowhere, making her jump. "Surround sound," he said. "The bass makes the chairs shake. Listen to this."

"So," Freddy was saying to a girl walking beside him with a backpack on. "Are you one of the maids at the university?"

"I'm reading English Literature at Trinity College," she replied and gave him a sideways glance. "I came top of the year in my prelims."

"Really? What does your pater think about that?"

"My father? He's very proud of me."

Freddy grunted. "Bloody waste if you ask me. You're pretty enough to marry off easily. Why fill your head with books when all you need to do is have babies?"

The image paused and Rupert looked at Margritte. "He's just warming up."

Margritte didn’t know what to say. Freddy had the same opinions as most of the men in Society; it seemed a little unfair to single him out.

Another button was pressed and the images sped up without sound. “Kay was a bloody angel—I would have punched him,” Rupert said. “Look at this.”

The image froze on a shot of Freddy’s hand on the girl’s derriere. The images moved in slow motion and Margritte watched the girl step away swiftly. Freddy seemed to laugh and said something to her—addressing her bosom rather than her face.

“Kay was pretty damn eloquent when she came and reported on him,” Rupert said. “Did you know he was like this?”

“He’s never been so brazen at any of my dinner parties or soirées,” Margritte said. “I suppose he felt free of the strict social rules of the Nether.” As Rupert’s frown deepened she added, “That’s no excuse, of course. He can be rather…trying.”

“Then why the buggeration did you invite him to check out Oxford?”

“Because he’s rich,” she replied, spreading her hands. “One of the wealthiest in Londinium, now the Rosas are gone. I thought a college would be expensive to run and his deep pockets would be an asset.”

“Maggie.” Rupert shook his head. “I’m a Sorcerer. Money really isn’t a problem. I wonder if you were thinking about how much of a dent in the Londinium tithe his defection would make.”

Margritte put on her most charming smile. “I would be lying to you if I said it hadn’t crossed my mind.”

“Well, the others who come had better be more civilised than him or else this isn’t going to work at all. I don’t want any of your kind treating the women here like that. Mundanus has moved on and if they can’t handle that, they don’t have a place here.”

She noted the flush in his cheeks, the way he waved the Bakelite stick around. He really meant it. “You aren’t what I expected at all,” she said.

He frowned at her. “I don’t know how women like you survive there.”

“What do you mean by ‘women like me’?”

“With a brain. With some fire in your belly.”

“Not all men are like Freddy.” The ache returned to her breast.

“I met Bartholomew,” Rupert said, putting the Bakelite into a pocket at the side of his chair. “He seemed like a decent guy.”

“When did you meet him?”

“Oh…years ago. Before you were married. He grew up here. You knew that though. I knew his father better, of course. He was a brilliant man. Shame about Queen Anne…that really fucked him up.”

“That was the Irises,” Margritte said. “They cursed her. Bartholomew’s father couldn’t cope with the fact that he couldn’t do anything to break it.” She shifted onto her side, ignoring the tiny voice at the back of her mind complaining about the indecency of it all. “Tell me what Bartholomew was like when he was young.”

Rupert tucked his hands behind his head. “He was quiet but not shy. Earnest. Bloody clever.” He sighed. “Shame the Fae had their hooks in him, otherwise he would have made a brilliant apprentice.”

“He didn’t want to leave Oxenford,” she said. “But the Patroon insisted he establish himself in Londinium.”

“I’m sorry you lost him.”

“Thank you. And I’m sorry about Freddy. He would have heard about the letters I sent to my other friends and I couldn’t let him feel left out. He drove us mad but he was a loyal friend. Still is.”

“Like those dogs, you know, the really big ones that slobber everywhere and stink the house out. You want to get rid of them but it’s hard when

they’re so fucking happy to see you when you come home.”

As she watched him speak, Margritte tried to unpick the knot of the man sitting next to her. He was hundreds of years old and yet acted like a mundane with the most appalling manners. Why do that? Did he want to shock her? Did he want her to form a bad opinion of him? Men rarely did, they were all so needy, so vulnerable in their own way.

“Did you have a dog?”

“Me?” He laughed. “I hate dogs. And the people who love them.”

She planned to leave but somehow the conversation held her. He told her about the city, about the research being done at the university, about the students. She wanted to ask him about sorcery but held back. They hardly knew each other and it was something he’d never tell anyone, let alone someone from Society. He remembered a bottle of wine he’d put away and it was a fine vintage. They shared memories of what they’d been doing the year it was bottled and for a few hours she forgot the Irises and the plan to destroy William. Rupert told her about quantum physics and she told him about the art he was displaying and yet knew little about.

When the headache started she assumed it was the wine. The conversation had lulled and they were both flopped back in the chairs, staring at the ceiling. She felt warm and sleepy and tried to find the energy to announce she should leave.

Rupert was rubbing his eyes. “It’s getting stuffy in here, I’m going to open a window.”

“Alex will be wondering where I am,” she said, drowsy and heavy-headed. “I won’t tell him I’ve been with you.”

“Why not? There are people in this city who’d cut off their baby finger to have an evening with me.”

“Who?”

He shrugged as he went down the floating stairs. “People.”

She listened to him swear as he fumbled with one of the latches. When the expletives increased in frequency she pulled herself out of the chair with effort and looked down on the floor below. “Something wrong?”

He abandoned the window and went to the next one along. “I don’t open them very often.”

“Would you be very offended if I told you this mezzanine doesn’t work?”

“What do you mean? It works perfectly.”

“I mean aesthetically. It cuts the space in two.”

“But I like that. Oh, for fuck’s sake, what is going on with these bloody things?”

“But it breaks the flow of the—” She stopped when she saw the irritation on his face shift to worry. “What’s wrong?”

He went to the next window and then crossed the room and tried three on the other side. “They’re jammed.” He glanced up at her. “Come down.”

She took the stairs slowly, feeling sluggish and uncertain of her footing. The wine had been stronger than she thought; she’d only allowed herself one glass. Rupert went to the door and tried the handle. His concern lit a flicker of worry in her chest. “Are we locked in?”

“Seems that way.”

“But it’s your house. Can’t you unlock the door?”

“Nope. Something is very fucking wrong here. The air isn’t right…” He turned in a circle a couple of times, hands on top of his head. “Fuck this for a game of soldiers.”

Margritte wrapped her arms about herself, regretting having stayed so long. Rupert patted the pockets in his trousers and she noticed the sheen on his forehead and upper lip. He pulled something round and silver out of one

of the pockets and after a moment of fiddling, flicked a yo-yo out from his hand.

“Fuck.”

“What are you doing?” She went to him, her legs leaden. “This isn’t the time to play with toys! Open the door, I want to leave!”

“So do I,” he yelled. “And this isn’t a toy.” He flicked it out again and then wiped the sweat from his face. “Shit. I can’t open a Way. Something’s locked this place down, I don’t think anything’s getting in or out.”

“Including the air?”

He nodded and then his eyes shifted to the right. “Are your earrings silver?”

“Yes, but what does—”

“Give one of them to me.”

“This is most—”

“Just do it!”

His shout echoed around the room. She struggled to unhook the earring with shaking fingers but finally dropped it into his outstretched hand. He gave it a brief inspection then threw it on the stone tiles.

“Rupert! That’s—”

“Oh, holy fucksticks,” he said and knelt on the floor. He picked up the earring and threw it again, cheek pressed to the tiles as he did so. “It’s not even touching the tiles. Someone’s warded the building against silver. Only a Sorcerer would know to do that. I’m being attacked.”

“By another Sorcerer?” Margritte struggled not to shriek. “Are you sure?”

He pulled her down next to him. “Watch,” he ordered and she stared at the earring as it was thrown again. There was no tinkle of metal against

stone and when she moved to only inches away she could see it hovering half an inch above the stone.

“It’s floating,” she whispered.

“It’s a fucking disaster,” he said and then hurried to the door leading to one of the partitioned-off areas. “Locked too,” he muttered. “Makes sense.” He came back to her and dropped onto his backside. “I never should’ve locked Benson away. I tidied up because you were coming and I didn’t want you to see him.”

“Who’s Benson?” she asked as she retrieved her earring and put it back where it should be.

He didn’t answer. He was staring at the floor, head in his hand, elbows on his knees. She sat next to him, waiting for him to come up with a suggestion, but he said nothing for what felt like hours.

“I don’t feel right. We shouldn’t be feeling anything like this so soon, there’s enough air in here to keep us alive for at least twenty-four hours, if not longer. The place is warded against all the—” He hit his forehead with the heel of his hand. “Fuckshitbollocksandwank. It’s carbon dioxide. The place isn’t warded against a natural by-product of breathing and whoever did this knows that. It must be being pumped in somewhere.” He stood and looked at the ceiling. “All right,” he finally said. “I don’t have anything here that can help. It’s all locked away because I’m a twat and I didn’t want you to see any of my sorcerous stuff.”

“Can’t you just do some sorcery to make some fresh air?”

He snorted. “It’s not like that.”

“Oh!” She searched for her reticule in the folds of black satin. “I have a key that—”

“Fae charms won’t work in here. It’s warded to fuck against all their shit.”

“Oh, Rupert, must you swear so much in an emergency?”

He half-smiled. “There’s no better time. I’ve been royally shafted here, but there’s a chance we can get out. I have some emergency mechanisms in place, but we’ll have to wait.”

“What’s the use of emergency mechanisms if they don’t work in an emergency? What in the Worlds are you waiting for?”

“To die.”

He appeared to be serious. “I beg your pardon?”

“It’ll only kick in if I get into real difficulties. If I lose consciousness and my breathing is too shallow it’ll start then.”

“What if it doesn’t?”

“Then this is the last time we’ll be drinking wine of an evening.”

“What kind of Sorcerer suffocates in his own house?” Her voice was getting higher but she didn’t care. “I thought you were supposed to be all-powerful.”

“I am, in the right circumstances. I don’t know how much longer we’ve got before the air quality gets too bad so we need to do a couple of things now, and then wait, all right?”

He shuffled back until he reached the wall. “Come over here,” he said as he undid his belt.

She stayed still. “Chancellor, I have no idea what you have in mind but there is nothing I want to participate in whilst you are not wearing your trousers.”

“Come over here, Maggie, for fuck’s sake. I’m just taking my belt off.”

Her ears were buzzing and she just wanted to lie down and go to sleep but he kept calling her and there seemed very little else to do. “If I die in here I’ll never forgive you.”

“You’re not going to die like this,” he said as he straightened his legs out. “But I want to make sure that you’re saved too, not just me.” He patted his lap. “Come and sit here.”

“Right, that’s it.” She started to get up but he caught hold of her arm.

“Maggie, I’m not making a totally shit pass at you. We’re probably going to die. I’m feeling about as randy as a mathematics professor. Now do as I ask, please.”

She wondered what Bartholomew would make of it all. How in the Worlds had she got herself into such an absurd situation? “If I think for a moment you’re planning to take advantage of me I’ll go and die in one of the more comfortable chairs upstairs. Alone.”

He held his hands up as she sat on his lap. She didn’t know where to look and shook with embarrassment. She remembered a parlour game they’d played the season before in which they had to sit in laps and imitate animals but they were all tipsy and besides, it was only a game. This, however…what was this?

“I’ll be taken out of here if the mechanism works,” Rupert said. His breath smelt of Cabernet Sauvignon. “I don’t want you to be left behind. That’s all.” He gathered up the front of his top as if about to take it off. Margritte considered slapping him but then he stretched the opening and brought it down over her head so they were both effectively wearing it.

“What do you think you’re doing?” It was definitely a shriek.

“Move your arms up a bit,” he said, pulling the belt around his back. “I’m going to see if this’ll fit round both of us.”

He manoeuvred her waist until she was pressed right against him and managed to pull it in enough to reach the first hole. He wrapped his arms around her and let out a long sigh. “I’m really sorry about this. For what it’s

worth, I just want to promise I didn't plan this in any way. I didn't even think you'd stay for a drink."

"If this thing does work, I want you to promise me you'll never tell a soul about this."

"I promise. And you can relax. Lean your head back if you need to."

"I do not."

She sat with her back as straight as a poker, trying to keep as much of her body away from his even though it was proving impossible. His breath tickled the back of her neck and she felt hot and sleepy and slightly sick. It was like her corset had been laced too tightly and, no matter how deeply she tried to breathe in, it never felt enough.

"If I'm going to die, though," he said after a while, "having a beautiful woman sitting on my lap whilst I suffocate is a great way to go."

"I think you're insane," she mumbled back. She felt his chest rising up and down, up and down and then she realised she was leaning against him, her head on his shoulder. "Rupert," she whispered after a while. "Are you frightened?"

He didn't reply and she tried to twist around to look at him properly but didn't have the room. Her chest was hurting and her lips were tingling and she had the sudden thought that if their bodies were found like this it would be the scandal of the decade.

A loud bang against the partition wall made her yelp. There was another and cracks appeared in the plaster. The third made glasses smash on the floor above and the cracks widen. She watched paint flakes fall as her vision was peppered with blue lights. Something broke through as her sight tunnelled, something made of metal as tall as a man moving towards them at great speed before she slipped away with Bartholomew's name on her lips.

12

Carter filled most of the seat opposite her in the carriage and Cathy had taken to staring out at the mists to feel less crammed in. He rode in silence and seemed quite content once he'd checked the carriage over before they'd left the house.

The kiss Will had left on her cheek was still on her mind. He'd come out to the lobby when he saw the carriage pull up and saw her dressed for visiting. "Where are you going?"

"To see Charlotte Persificola-Viola," she said, noting the way Carter stood to attention whenever Will was there. "Freddy's sister-in-law."

"Oh. Did she invite you?"

"…No. I just wanted to meet her. It's part of what I should be doing, isn't it? Getting to know the women of the Court."

He smiled and embraced her. Carter looked away. "That's exactly right. Why are you starting with her?"

Her heart had smacked the inside of her ribs as she wondered what to tell him. She couldn't risk telling him about the files Max had delivered to her, but staying as close to the truth as possible was the best policy when dealing with the Fae and probably husbands too. "She employed the woman who was my Governess to teach her children. I thought it would be a good thing to talk about…you know…something in common."

He kissed her forehead. "I knew you'd be a fine Duchess. You're too clever not to be. Just make sure you don't overdo it, and rest if you need to."

She'd wanted to comment that finding something in common with Charlotte hardly required a university-level education but kept it behind her teeth. He was just trying to encourage her and bolster her fragile confidence. She smiled back at him. "I'm trying. In every sense of the word."

He'd asked her to tell him all about it at dinner and she fiddled with the buttons at the wrist of her gloves as she wondered what would come after they'd eaten. The previous evening he'd elected to stay at the Tower for private audiences after the Court was done and she was asleep by the time he'd got home. If he was home for dinner, there was no chance of such an easy way to avoid him.

Then she remembered Lucy's excitement, her exuberant speculation about which one of them would fall pregnant first and how wonderful it would be to have children close in age living in the same city. She and Tom had been married for months and trying for a child just as long. She was horribly open about it with her. The only good thing about enduring the conversation was hearing that it took some couples a while to conceive. She still didn't want to take the risk though.

Cathy sighed at the mists. Committing to staying with Will made it almost impossible to avoid having children, especially with the additional pressure they were both under. She'd considered trying to find a way to get contraceptives from Mundanus. Even though she'd been cursed she'd still read all the literature provided by the universities she'd attended, so she knew exactly what she needed and how to get it. But there were two major obstacles. The first was getting to a family planning clinic without any of the staff seeing it and reporting to Bennet. Another visit from Max was risky enough. The second was the fear that if Lord Iris summoned her back

into Exilium he would be able to detect what she was doing and she couldn't bear to think about the consequences.

"Is something wrong, your Grace?" Carter asked. "Is the carriage making you feel unwell?"

"I'm fine." She smiled. "Carter, did you ever know anyone who changed their job?"

"Well…house servants progress through the ranks, if that's what you mean, your Grace?"

"No, I meant someone who changed specialism."

He shook his head. "I've never heard of anything like that, your Grace."

Charlotte's was the first name that had leaped out from Miss Rainer's Agency file. She had employed Rainer as a lady's maid, then four years later Miss Rainer became her governess. The two roles were completely different in terms of status and had different implications for the member of staff. As a lady's maid, Rainer would have lived her whole life in the Nether, never being expected to fetch and carry in and out of Mundanus. But as a governess she would only sleep in the Nether while her working hours would be spent in the nursery wing in Mundanus. If Carter was anything to go by, Miss Rainer wouldn't have initiated the change and for her mistress to insist the Agency allow her to change positions—and thereby shorten her life significantly—seemed rather odd.

"Are all Agency staff given a specialism when young?" she asked Carter.

"Yes, your Grace, apart from those brought in later of course."

She nodded. "Like the Rosas." She wondered where they'd ended up.

"And the people who grew up in Mundanus."

Cathy sat forwards, all attention on him now. "What do you mean?"

“There are some staff who join the Agency after being born as mundanes. There’s one in your household, your Grace. Coll Jones was a mundane and entered the Agency just under two years ago. I hope you don’t mind me knowing, it’s just that I reviewed all of the staff when I took on my position.”

Had he chosen to live as a servant? Why in the Worlds would he want to do that? “But how do they end up at the Agency? Surely that’s a breach of the Treaty?”

“I’m certain the Agency wouldn’t do such a thing.” Carter seemed genuinely appalled at the implication.

“Of course not,” she said lightly. He wasn’t the person to speculate with.

The carriage was slowing down and Cathy looked out of the window to see a large Georgian house, one built of Portland Stone rather than the Bath stone she was used to. It had neat ornamental hedges at the edge of the drive, a subtle way to demonstrate wealth, and a stylised violet set into a stained-glass panel above the front door.

As the step was lowered she reviewed what she knew of Charlotte and her husband Bertrand. He was the younger brother of Freddy Viola and, from what she saw of him at the Court, seemed to be the exact opposite. She couldn’t remember seeing him with his wife, probably because he’d been managing Freddy’s attempts to sour the room against Will the whole evening.

Dame Iris had told her that Charlotte was one of the most beautiful in the Court but when beauty was the standard Cathy didn’t really think it was anything of note. She wanted to know if she held the same ideals as Miss Rainer and, if she did, whether she would be a good ally. All she’d learned from the Agency file was that she married Bertrand almost one hundred

years ago and aside from a problem with her first lady's maid—one that Miss Rainer had been brought in to replace—there was a standard turnover of staff. There was nothing mentioned about her maiden name or family, which surprised Cathy, but other than that everything seemed normal. They were sidelined politically, thanks to Freddy's constant bad behaviour, and lived quietly enough not to merit more than a passing mention in the Dame's Londinium Who's Who. The only reason Dame Iris had mentioned them at all was because of their wealth, something Cathy had already learned from Margritte. Cathy wondered where she was and how she was coping with the grief. The guilt she carried with Will sat like stones in her stomach.

Carter helped her down the steps and she smoothed out the creases from her skirts. The dark blue gown was wider in the skirt than most of her clothes and had a large collar with wide lapels. Her maid had chosen it to cover the fact that her corset wasn't as tightly laced as normal, on the insistence of the nurse. It was the only time the nurse had said something she'd been glad to hear.

The footman pulled the chain for the doorbell and Cathy took her time to go to the door. She'd sent a message ahead that she intended to visit. It was strange to think that Charlotte might be worrying in the same way she dreaded every time Dame Iris came to the house. Cathy didn't like the thought of people being similarly terrified of her. She wasn't going to be like that.

A butler answered the door and she was invited in. Carter went first, eliciting a sniff from the butler. She followed, amused by Carter's diligence. No family would be stupid enough to attack the Duchess of Londinium at their own house when both households were aware of her visit. It would no doubt get back to Bennet, but it was one of her duties as Duchess to visit

other wives. She just had to make sure that none of the servants overheard their conversation.

The house interior was pleasant enough with black and white chequered tiles on the floor and portraits hung on the walls. She noticed one of a man who looked just like Freddy, so much so that she wondered if it was him, but the woman standing next to him in the painting didn't look anything like Georgiana. There were, unsurprisingly, vases of violets on pedestals and little tables that smelt of summer and made her long for blue sky again.

Charlotte Viola came to the main doors leading off the lobby. She was indeed beautiful, strikingly so, with high cheekbones and flawless skin. She appeared to be in her late twenties but Cathy had no idea what her real age was. Her brown hair was arranged in the classical Greek style and her dress was Empire line, making her look like she'd stepped out of the Regency. It bothered Cathy that she was noticing these things. Dame Iris had clearly infected her thinking.

"Your Grace," Charlotte said and gave a deep, elegant curtsy. "It's a pleasure and an honour to welcome you to our home."

Cathy's hand twitched as she almost gave an uncertain wave. Instead she inclined her head and smiled, just as she'd been taught the day before the Court. She felt like a fraud. "Thank you. And please call me Cath… erine."

"And, of course, please call me Charlotte. Would you like to come through to my drawing room?"

"I'm sorry about the short notice," Cathy said.

"Oh, it's no bother at all," Charlotte replied. "Quite the contrary. I'm afraid my husband had a prior engagement and wasn't here when your message arrived."

That suited her just fine. Cathy glanced behind her, suspecting that Carter was about to follow her in. “You can wait outside, Carter.”

“But—”

She glared at him and he backed down. She couldn’t remember that ever working on anyone before. She followed Charlotte into a richly furnished drawing room with a cheerful fire and a table already laid out for tea. The butler closed the door behind them. There was an embroidery frame in the corner with a partially completed country garden design. It seemed that women kept in the Nether developed a passion for embroidering and sewing the things they could no longer enjoy in Mundanus.

“Do you like to embroider?” Charlotte asked, having noticed Cathy’s attention.

“No,” Cathy said as she sat. “I’m not nearly as gifted as you.”

“I find it passes the time so pleasantly,” Charlotte said. “Would you care for a cup of tea?”

Cathy nodded. Charlotte wasn’t what she’d expected, but she wasn’t even sure what that had been. Someone more like Miss Rainer? She reminded herself to be patient. Charlotte was hardly going to open the conversational dance with an observation about the subjugation of women in society.

“May I compliment you on your dress,” Charlotte said as she handed over the tea. The cup and saucer were the typical dainty porcelain favoured in Society, with tiny violets incorporated into the design. “It’s such a beautiful colour.”

Cathy sipped the tea after an embarrassed smile. Small talk was still agonising, even when she was trying instead of daydreaming herself away

from it. Charlotte served sandwiches and cake as Cathy struggled to think of a way to talk about something worthwhile.

“How are you finding Londinium?” Charlotte asked. “I understand it’s quite different to Aquae Sulis.”

“It is,” Cathy said after hurriedly swallowing a mouthful. She felt the lump moving towards her stomach and fought the desire to belch. “Have you been to Aquae Sulis?”

“Sadly not.”

The crackling of the fire filled the room as they both sipped and took dainty bites. Cathy put her teacup down, determined to end the agony. “I wanted to speak to you about Miss Rainer.”

“Oh!” Charlotte’s face became radiant with happiness. “Miss Rainer is an excellent governess. She taught my daughter and son.”

“Yes, she taught me too,” Cathy shifted to the edge of her seat now she was on topic.

“How splendid,” Charlotte said.

“She taught me very well. I understand you were the one who…made her into a governess?”

Charlotte’s smile lingered and she seemed to be searching for words. “Miss Rainer is a very intelligent woman.”

“Is that why you suggested she change career?”

“She was a superlative lady’s maid too,” Charlotte said. “However, she excelled in her later role. She was so passionate about things that matter.”

Cathy paused. She had the impression she was having a conversation slightly out of sync. Was Charlotte trying to tell her she knew about what Miss Rainer used to teach but didn’t feel safe enough to say it to her directly? “Have you been in touch with her lately?”

“I understand she’s been very successful and taught in many households since she was here, thanks to my recommendation.”

Why hadn’t she answered the question? “I saw her, only a few weeks ago, and something terrible has happened to her.”

Charlotte’s smile was rapidly replaced by concern. Cathy could see there was something else…fear?

“She’s a scullery maid now,” she continued. “And she isn’t herself at all, it’s like someone sucked out her personality and replaced it with a job description.”

Charlotte’s eyes became round and she looked away, her cup rattling in the saucer, but she still didn’t say anything.

Cathy was losing her patience. Just because she was the Duchess it didn’t mean they couldn’t talk properly. “I think the Agency did something to her because my parents reported her unorthodox lessons.”

“Miss Rainer was a superlative teacher who gave only the best lessons,” Charlotte said with a voice suddenly bright and cheerful.

Cathy frowned. “Please, can’t we speak candidly? I know I’m the Duchess but you don’t have to be afraid of talking to me about this.” Charlotte remained silent but was still unable to meet Cathy’s eyes. Cathy lowered her voice, in case the servants were listening in, ready to report back to Bennet. “Don’t you understand? I think the Agency did something terrible to Miss Rainer because she was teaching me about equal rights for women, the Suffragettes and Peterloo and all the other things we’re not supposed to be taught. The people who run the Agency are…are…”

She couldn’t find the right words. What were they doing? Removing a problem reported by important clients or participating in a wider conspiracy against women? Was she mad to even consider the latter? Bennet had blackmailed her because she’d caused problems, not because of her sex.

“The Agency are always so helpful and are marvellous at providing just the right staff.” Charlotte’s cheerful voice made Cathy feel nervous.

“Are you afraid that something you say to me will get back to your husband?”

Charlotte took a deep breath and seemed to force herself to look Cathy in the eye. “My husband is a very powerful man. He always gets what he wants because he’s so clever and resourceful.”

Cathy shivered. “Did he do something to you?”

Charlotte looked away. “My husband is absolutely devoted to me.”

“Oh, bollocks,” Cathy muttered beneath her breath. “He’s put a curse on you, hasn’t he?”

Charlotte giggled and covered her mouth with a shaking hand as if Cathy had told a silly joke.

“Is there anything at all you can tell me about Miss Rainer? Did you realise she was special and help her get out of the Nether as much as possible by being a governess? Is that why you did it?”

Charlotte stared down into her teacup. “It’s so lovely that we have someone so special in common,” she said, the cheerfulness switched back on like a sprite’s glow after a hammer had struck the globe. “Would you like to see where she used to teach my children? It was such a happy time.”

Cathy hoped this was a ploy to get them somewhere more private, or perhaps into Mundanus. Maybe the curse she’d been put under only worked in certain circumstances. “I’d like that very much.”

Charlotte put her teacup back very delicately and as they both stood she reached across and caught hold of Cathy’s hands. “I’m so delighted you came to see me. And I would be so very happy if we could be friends.”

There was an intensity in her eyes as she spoke and it moved Cathy to squeeze her hands back. “So am I. And I would like that too. I have a

feeling that I could be friends with anyone who knew Miss Rainer well."

"She is very talented," Charlotte said. "She always had a knack for working out who could be a good friend."

Charlotte led her out. Before Carter moved, Cathy ordered him to stay put and followed Charlotte up a wide staircase, both of them looked down on by dozens of portraits as they climbed. They passed a maid who bobbed a curtsy and hurried away. Clearly they hadn't expected the mistress of the house to take the Duchess on an impromptu tour.

"Miss Rainer was such a valued member of the household," Charlotte said when they reached the top floor. "Come and see how neatly she kept her old room. It hasn't changed since she left."

She opened the door of a room next to the green baize door that would lead out to the nursery wing. It seemed Charlotte didn't want to take her out into Mundanus.

The room was quite large and had several empty bookshelves. There was a single bed stripped of its linens and the personal effects were gone from the dressing table. Charlotte closed the door behind them as Cathy scanned the room, looking for anything unusual.

"Miss Rainer was such a neat person—we could always rely on her," Charlotte said, crouching down by the rug at the centre of the room. She flipped the corner over and revealed the joint between two floorboards. Cathy knelt down next to her. "She was always so particular about everything having its place, even this rug."

Charlotte was looking at what Cathy had thought was a knot in the wood but on closer inspection its edges were too uniform. It was a diamond-shaped hole between the two floorboards, large enough to put a finger into. She reached towards it, glancing at Charlotte for any protest and finding she was smiling at her, then tucked her finger into the hole. The

section of board closest to her was easy to pull up, revealing a cavity underneath. There was nothing there.

“She packed everything so neatly too,” Charlotte said. “I’m sure all of her other rooms were kept just as beautifully.”

Cathy had a sudden memory of Rainer outside the house the last time she saw her and the diamond-shaped scar on her thigh. She’d spoken about something important in the floor. She snapped her fingers. “The floor in her old room! At my parents’ house! That’s what she was trying to tell me! They had her taken away so quickly she didn’t even have a chance to pack. I bet whatever it is she used to hide is still there!”

Charlotte beamed and put the wood and rug back into place. “It’s so amazing, the effect a good teacher can have.”

“It really is,” Cathy said. She frowned at Charlotte, trying to work out the nature of the curse. If she knew exactly what it did, she could see if the Shopkeeper had something to break it. “I don’t suppose you can tell me anything about the curse you’ve been placed under.”

Charlotte giggled and covered her mouth in the same way as before. The curse was so powerful she looked genuinely amused, even though she must be raging inside.

“I’ll work it out and I’ll find a way to have it broken, I promise,” Cathy said. “I’d like to have a real conversation with you.”

“It’s a deep pleasure to be able to talk with you,” Charlotte replied. “I do hope we can do so again.”

They said their goodbyes once they were downstairs and Cathy got back into the carriage with Carter. “Change of plan,” she said as she waved goodbye. “We’re going to Aquae Sulis. To my parents’ house.”

“As you wish, your Grace.”

She settled back in the seat and thought about how much Charlotte had been able to convey despite the odd conversation. She hoped Miss Rainer's room was still relatively untouched and tried to imagine stepping foot in that house again. She'd hoped she'd never have to go back there; it held too many awful memories. Even though there had been the beginning of an understanding between her and her father on her wedding day it wasn't enough to quell the dread of seeing him again on home territory. She looked at Carter, who smiled back at her. At least this time there would be no fear of being beaten.

13

Sam had opened the envelope in the entrance to the forge. After building himself up to it for days it had been an anticlimax. He'd expected a more personal letter from Leanne but there was just a small key and an address for a bank with a contact person. On the back of the piece of paper was something more cryptic, in her handwriting, saying "The lady will want to know where you proposed to me and the gift I gave you on our wedding day before she gives you access to the box."

He assumed it was a safety deposit box key. The security questions were surprisingly sentimental for Leanne but at least he knew the answers to them. Mr Ferran was away again and it was simply a matter of asking the butler to arrange a car so he could go back to Bath. He'd had a hire car in mind but wasn't surprised when the chauffeur-driven limousine arrived.

He found the right person at the bank and when he showed her the key she seemed to know that Leanne had died. Condolences were offered, he answered her questions and then was taken to a room away from the public areas, full of deposit boxes. He wondered what was kept in the others as his was unlocked. Stolen diamonds? Wills written by paranoid millionaires? He didn't want to think about what would be in Leanne's.

The banker put the box on a small table and left him to remove the contents alone. He took a deep breath and lifted the top, finding another envelope inside with his name on it.

It contained a short note, a plastic keycard and an address for a storage company, the kind of place that had different-sized lockers for hire.

Dear Sam,

Sorry to make you run around like this, but it's necessary. Only you would know the answers to the security questions so I know it's you reading this and I know I must be dead. I hope you're all right. Everything you need to know about is at the storage place. When you go make sure you're alone and that no one else knows where you're going and why. That's really important, darling.

Leanne xx

He thought of the limousine parked on double yellow lines outside. The storage building was a taxi ride away; he'd get rid of the limo, walk home and then order one. He tucked the keycard and letter back in the envelope and slipped it into his inside jacket pocket.

Walking through Bath felt like being in a film set. He felt utterly detached from it. Sam rubbed the callouses on his hands with his thumbs as he walked, trying to work out what Leanne had been thinking when she'd set up the deposit box. What could possibly merit something so silly as all the cloak and dagger stuff? She hated Hollywood thrillers.

He was tempted to not go to the storage locker. He didn't want to find something that would shake him up again after he'd only just found something to drown out all the thinking.

The "For Sale" sign outside his house made him stop. It felt like coming home and yet, at the same time, it felt like it wasn't his any more. Holding both states made him feel exhausted. He needed a beer.

Sam unlocked the door, trying to ignore the machine-gun fire of memories. The air in the house was stale and it already smelt unlived in. The removals company that Iron's people had sorted for him had cleared everything out—including the hallway mirror, much to his relief—and

cleaned it. He'd had messages that the estate agents had reported interest and were certain it would sell soon but he felt nothing. He was as empty as the house.

He walked from room to room, listening to the echo of his footsteps. Then he called for a taxi. There was no point wallowing and putting off going to see what Leanne had hidden away. He needed it all to be over.

Cathy looked out onto the streets of Aquae Sulis and reddened when she saw some Peonias stop and stare at her carriage. The ducal coat of arms was emblazoned on the door and she hadn't appreciated how much attention it would attract. She'd assumed that they would just go through a Way to the stables outside Aquae Sulis and hire a carriage there, like anyone else would. But her footmen insisted on the Glamour to make the carriage exactly the same as her Londinium one, to ensure they were treated with the proper respect in the city. So much for a quiet flying visit.

She saw Elizabeth's face pressed against the window as the carriage stopped outside the house in Great Pulteney Street. Cathy couldn't help but glance up at the top-floor room she'd been locked in before the wedding and the sight of it made her feel nauseous. One footman rang the bell whilst the other lowered the step and opened the door. Carter got out first—she was used to the drill now—and by the time she'd got out and straightened her clothes again the butler was at the door and Elizabeth was pushing past him.

"Catherine!" she squeaked.

Cathy endured the embrace Elizabeth forced upon her. "Hello." Her sister had never pretended to be excited to see her, even after the years she'd spent in Mundanus.

“What are you doing here? You didn’t say you were coming to visit. What’s it like being a Duchess? Can I come to the Londinium Court for the Season? Is there anyone eligible you want to introduce me to? How’s Thomas?”

“Tom and Lucy are fine. Can I go inside?”

Elizabeth tittered. “Sorry.” She noticed Carter, her large eyes going up and up until she reached his face. He made her look even more childlike.

“That’s Carter, my bodyguard,” Cathy said. “Are Mother and Father at home?”

“No, they’re with Uncle Lavandula.”

Cathy brightened. “Ah, well, never mind. I just wanted to get a few things from my old room. I don’t have long anyway.”

Elizabeth buzzed around her like an ambitious mosquito searching for the perfect spot to suck out what she wanted. Cathy felt exhausted by the time she got into the house. The scent and sight of the poppies in their vases made her stomach turn over. She had to get this done as quickly as she could.

“I should offer you tea,” Elizabeth gasped.

“I just had some,” Cathy replied. “Could you…go and send a brief message over to Uncle’s house to say I can’t stay and I do apologise? No doubt someone has told him about the carriage.”

“I’ll get the butler—”

“No, I want you to do it,” Cathy said. “It’s a family thing, after all. And you do have such beautiful handwriting.”

Cathy watched her hurry off and thought back to the night Elizabeth told their father what Miss Rainer had been teaching them. She’d never hated someone so much and that old resentment was still there, buried under years of distance and the sure knowledge that Elizabeth would never

appreciate—or even care about—the damage she'd done. Miss Rainer's lessons had never managed to penetrate the thick fuzz of being constantly approved of for the most vacuous things. Elizabeth was perfect in the eyes of Society and Cathy had accepted a long time ago that there would never be any real relationship between them.

She left Carter posted at the bottom of the stairs and headed for the nursery wing, checked no one was in sight and went into Miss Rainer's old room. She knew her personal effects had been stripped out by the Agency staff so she was expecting it to be bare, but she still felt a tug of grief at seeing the empty bookshelves.

Knowing there wasn't much time, Cathy lifted the rug and searched for any diamond-shaped knots but the floorboards were pristine. She moved to the edges of the room, crawled under the dressing table and felt under the wardrobe, but all was smooth. As she ran her fingers under the bed she could hear Elizabeth calling her name downstairs. Her finger caught on the edge of something and a section of board lifted up. With a kettledrum heart she felt a sheaf of papers, pulled them out, stuffed them down her bodice, replaced the board and dashed out of the room on tiptoes as Carter was telling Elizabeth she was upstairs. She darted left and through the green baize door as Elizabeth started up the stairs. The tingle across her face made a grenade of childhood moments explode back into her memory.

She was in her room with a doll in each hand by the time Elizabeth made it to the doorway. Whatever had been stashed beneath the bed was now prickling her skin with its creased edges but Cathy did her best to ignore it.

"Why do you want those?" Elizabeth asked. "You never played with them."

"I thought they'd be a nice gift," Cathy replied. "If Tom has a girl."

Elizabeth's hands flapped. "Is Lucy pregnant?"

"Not yet," Cathy said. "I like to plan ahead."

"You might have a girl first," Elizabeth said, coming to her side.

"I doubt that," Cathy said. "I'll take these two. Mother won't mind, they're only gathering dust."

"Catherine…" Elizabeth began with a low voice. "What's it like?"

"What?"

"When…a man…does…"

"You mean sex?"

Cathy got the scarlet blush she'd aimed for. "Why do you have to be so crass?"

"I haven't got all day, I told you that. Besides, you'll find out for yourself soon enough."

"Does it hurt?"

"I'm going now." Cathy plucked a third doll from the shelf and marched out of the room.

"But none of my friends know anything and I can't ask Mother."

Cathy stopped and faced her. "It all depends on who you're with and whether they care about you. If you're lucky it will be wonderful."

"And if I'm not?"

Cathy shrugged. "Lie back and think of Albion. That's what they tell you to do, isn't it?" Elizabeth looked small and nervous. Cathy couldn't remember ever seeing her this way. "You'll be fine," she said, feeling bad for brushing her off, but unable to bring herself to have such a conversation with her sister.

"Will you come and visit properly soon?"

"Probably." Cathy hurried back into the Nether and down the stairs. "But I'm so busy, you know, doing…Duchess stuff." She handed the dolls

to Carter, who tucked them under one arm as if he'd been asked to carry dolls every day of his working life. "Take care. And give my regards to the parentals."

Elizabeth gave her a swift peck on the cheek. "It may cheer you to know that I'm horribly jealous of you. It's a rather strange feeling."

Cathy didn't know how to respond to that, so she kissed her back and left. Moments after she got back into the carriage she took the dolls from Carter and put them on the seat next to her. "Oh! I think I left my reticule in my old room. Could you ask Elizabeth?"

Once he was out again she turned her back to the house and pulled out the pieces of paper. They were all the same: vouchers for something called a "book spa" at Mr B's Emporium of Reading Delights. There was an address in the centre of Bath. She checked the back for any secret messages but there was nothing except a tiny star and the name "Jane" written in the top left corner of each one.

She just had time to stuff all but one of the papers back into her bodice and tuck the single voucher into her reticule before Carter returned.

"It isn't in the house, your Grace."

"I found it." She waved it at him. "Sorry, it was in the carriage the whole time, silly me." She couldn't go to a mundane bookshop dressed as she was and Carter would never let her go there anyway. "Let's go home," she said. It was time to take another risk.

Sam looked for the right door inside the soulless warehouse. Everything was brightly lit and numbered but still felt abandoned. The keycard gave him twenty-four-hour access and there wasn't even a person to check who

he was. By the time he'd got to the right floor and found Leanne's storage space he felt like the last man left alive.

The keycard opened the door and he put it back in his pocket, then switched on the light. It was a five-metre-square cube containing about fifty cardboard boxes. They all had lids and handle holes, like the ones used by offices to store files. There was still space to go in and close the door. A couple of boxes sat in one corner with a large envelope resting on top addressed to him.

His mouth was dry as he opened it. There were several sheets of A4 paper inside, the top one a letter in Leanne's handwriting. He sat on the floor and leaned against the boxes to read it.

Dear Sam,

I've been writing these letters every three months for the last five years and I still find it hard. All of the others are in the envelope, the most recent on top, the first at the bottom. I couldn't bring myself to throw them away.

So you'll be wondering why I've made you come here in secret when I hate those kinds of films and it's because I've been doing something dangerous. Now I'm dead (that's still so weird to write) I have to tell you and that could make things dangerous for you too, for a short while. Just follow the instructions below and you'll be all right.

We've had a tough few weeks lately and it's so hard not to tell you what's been going on. I hope that when you know what I've been doing you'll forgive me for not being there. I think the Brussels trip was the final straw for you and I've been finding it tough too. All the stuff in these boxes has driven us apart but it's

much bigger than the two of us. That's a horrible thing to say but if you decide to read it I hope you'll agree.

I've been gathering evidence for a friend in an environmental group. He's someone you met when we were at uni: Martin Barclay. I think you bought some gear off him once. Anyway, he and I cooked up a plan which came to fruition shortly after you and I got married: I got a job at Pin PR. His dad knew they were covering up stuff but all of his friends and family were known by CoFerrum Inc so they couldn't infiltrate. They didn't know me, so I went in with the plan to uncover some data, get it to Martin and his dad and blow the lid on it all.

The more I found out the deeper I realised the cover-up went. Pin does the PR for CoFerrum and several other major international companies involved in the minerals and metals trade and they've been fucking up the planet and the people who work for them for many, many years. In these boxes is enough evidence to cause a scandal and embarrass them into stopping some of it. I just want to carry on a bit longer to see if I can get close to the famous Mr Ferran. He's the kingpin and he's bloody hard to get close to, but I think Neugent is one of his lieutenants so I'm hanging on and going as high as I can to nail him. Martin knows I want to play the long game and he's persuaded his dad to let me do it my way, but when they find out I've died they'll need to know what happened. His contact details are with the instructions. Please follow them so you're not dragged into this any more than you have to be. CoFerrum is massively powerful and they've killed people to keep things quiet in the past. They

may have done that to me—I might have just had an accident—obviously I don't know at the time of writing this.

Sam, I want you to know I love you and I'm sorry I put this before our marriage. I wanted to tell you, so many times, I really did, but I couldn't. I wouldn't let myself because I had to believe my own lie day in day out. Does that make sense? I couldn't open up to you and then pack it all away every morning to go and pretend to be who I needed to be to get this evidence.

You're probably angry with me and I understand that. You have every right to be. I hoped that once I got everything I needed to nail Ferran I could just come clean with you and we'd work it all out. I guess we don't have that chance now. Please don't be angry with Martin, this was all my choice and every time I spoke to him he told me to stop. The only thing I ask is that you make sure this information gets to Martin and his dad so something can be done. I may not have got Ferran, but we could still do them a lot of damage with what I've collected here.

I love you. And I know people say this and don't really mean it but when you're all right again, go and find someone to love who'll treat you better than I did. I just want you to be happy, Sam. God knows you deserve it. And I'm sorry.

Leanne xxx

P.S. There was never anything between Neugent and me, in case you were ever worried. He's an odious little shit and I can't stand the man.

At the bottom were Martin's contact details and the whereabouts of an inventory and report on the data in the boxes to pass on to him. Sam went back to the beginning and read it again, then flipped through the pages,

seeing letter after letter, filled with the same apologies, the same instructions but a different note about what had been happening in the weeks before the respective letter. There were mentions of birthdays and arguments, reconciliations and the knowledge they were drifting apart. Their marriage's decline was there on several pieces of paper in front of him and the whole time he'd had no idea why she'd stopped loving him nor why she'd turned into a different woman. She hadn't, in fact, done either. He had no idea how to feel or how to handle it. So he sat there, staring at the letters and surrounded by boxes, as his mind churned and a headache grew.

Dressed in the mundane clothes provided for her honeymoon, Cathy dashed from the Victoria Art Gallery in central Bath to John Street. She didn't have much time; Will was at the Tower and she had two hours until dinner. Carter was posted outside her bedroom thinking she'd gone to lie down and there was a risk that someone could check on her at any time. But she couldn't get so close to finding what Miss Rainer had been up to and not act immediately.

She'd entered the mundane anchor property via the nursery wing and used a Charm of Openings keyed to Bath. She'd ordered it from the Emporium as part of the household order, knowing it wouldn't draw any attention as she used to live in Aquae Sulis. Many people sent their staff to shop in Bath after they moved away. If questioned she could say it was for sending the footman to buy soap from a particular shop and no one would give it a second thought. She wished she'd thought of it before.

The voucher for the book spa was clutched tight in her hand. The bookshop was tucked in one of the Georgian back streets, not far from the

Assembly Rooms, and after a brief stop-off to buy a new mobile phone with cash taken from the household budget, it didn't take too long to find. She liked it as soon as she walked in. The smell of books made her feel excited and at home all at once. There was a man with blond hair and blue eyes behind the counter and another man, tall and balding, talking with a woman with long red hair wearing an eclectic mix of mundane and period clothing. For a moment Cathy couldn't help but stare at her, wondering if she was from one of the Great Families on a day out, but then she realised that one of them would never wear a corset on the *outside* of her blouse.

"Can I help you?" A woman approached with a friendly smile. Her greying hair framed her face with a tumble of gentle curls.

Cathy held out the voucher. "I have this voucher for a book spa. I don't really know what it is though."

"Present, was it?"

"…yes."

The assistant flipped the voucher over and looked in the top left corner. "Well, you're talking to the right person. I'm Jane. This way, please."

She led Cathy through the shop and they passed an old roll-top bath which had been filled and converted into a bookshelf. Cathy decided that it was probably the best bookshop she'd ever been to.

They went up a staircase at the far end of the shop and Cathy was led through the first floor, which was filled with wooden bookshelves and books. The floorboards were uneven with age. They went through one room then through an alcove to a second with a fireplace and two comfy chairs. A door with a stained-glass panel was set in the corner and Jane was heading straight for it.

"We usually do the mundane book spas here," she said, glancing at the chairs as she pulled a key out of her pocket. "You should try one. I'll give

you a leaflet all about it when you leave, if you like."

"So I won't be having the same thing?"

Jane smiled but said nothing. She picked up a glass lantern with a small candle inside and lit it. Cathy watched her turn the key once, unlocking the door, and then she whispered a Charm as she turned the key a second time, opening a Way into the Nether. It was a similar Charm to the one the Shopkeeper had taught her for getting to the Emporium from Mundanus.

"Do you have anything to do with the Emporium of Things in Between and Besides?"

"No, we're totally independent."

After checking there were no customers in the room, Jane opened the door and stepped through the familiar haze marking the threshold between Mundanus and the Nether. Cathy followed and found herself in another room that could easily have been part of the mundane bookshop, with walls covered by book-laden shelves. There was a fireplace but the grate was empty and two armchairs. Jane lit two more lanterns and handed the first to Cathy.

"I'll leave you to browse. Are there any topics in particular you'd like to read about?"

Cathy looked at the books on the nearest shelf and many were familiar —several had been at her flat in Manchester. They were the books Miss Rainer had taught her from: essays on feminism, social-political history and the works of several remarkable men and women. "I don't suppose you have the collected works of Aphra Behn?" she asked in a moment of nostalgia.

Jane crossed the room and pulled a weighty tome from a shelf. Cathy recognised the edition instantly. "Will you be coming on Thursday?"

"What for?"

“Miss Rainer didn’t tell you? We haven’t seen her for such a long time. There’s a group of like-minded people who meet on the third Thursday of every month. Just come to the shop at 7 o’clock and ask for me.”

Cathy felt tears spring in her eyes. Miss Rainer had already done the hard work for her; there were people like her in the Nether and they were already meeting and they would have a plan she could get behind.

“I’ll be here.” She took the collected plays from Jane. “I can’t stay for long. I’ll only need five minutes.”

“Just go through the door when you’re ready.”

Cathy sat down after Jane left and flicked to Miss Rainer’s favourite play, *The Forced Marriage*. It was easy to find the right place; the spine naturally fell open at the page. She remembered the day Miss Rainer had climbed onto the table and said the words out loud, declaring that they were written to be spoken on a stage, not read silently in a classroom. Cathy kicked off her shoes and stood on the nearest chair. “This is for you, Miss Rainer,” she whispered and then read, “‘Love furnish me with powerful arguments: Direct my tongue that my disorder’d sence, May speak my passion more than eloquence.’”

Her hands tingled as a pulse of magic rippled through the book and the pages flipped over rapidly until they fell open at the end of the play. As she stared at it, a piece of paper slotted between the pages came into view and on it a list of names in Miss Rainer’s handwriting. Cathy would bet her own library that they were people sympathetic to the feminist cause.

Cathy dropped into the chair and pulled the paper out. Scanning the list she saw several were crossed out, names she’d requested files on after seeing them in Miss Rainer’s. They had all had a form inserted at the top of the file filled with obscure abbreviations she’d planned to ask Max to

decode at the Agency. Now she was even more determined to find out what they meant.

Charlotte's name was there but hers was crossed out with a wavy line—perhaps to indicate she was still around but unable to speak her mind. Cathy flipped the page over to find more and the first to leap out at her were Margritte and Bartholomew Tulipa.

"Oh, God," she whispered. "Fucking Roses." If it hadn't been for them and the way they'd manipulated Will, the ideal Duke and Duchess would have the throne and would already be working to change Society. Then she remembered the day, once she'd escaped life in the Nether, she went to Aphra Behn's grave and laid flowers there. There was a bunch of tulips already there; she could still see the ribbon tied around them, blue against the grey stone. Cathy slapped her forehead with her hand. Why hadn't she asked Margritte if she'd left them?

She had to go and talk to her. She was the first person she'd met in Londinium—in Society—that she'd genuinely wanted to befriend. There had to be a way to make things right without destroying Will, and the only way to find it was to find Margritte and talk to her. Just the two of them, away from Society, as equals.

14

Margritte woke with an excruciating headache and a sense of total disorientation. She opened her eyes and looked straight into two black discs in a silver oval. It took a moment to realise it was an approximation of a face, only inches away from her own. She cried out and the oval withdrew.

“The patient is awake. Shall I dispose of her?” The voice was male but it didn’t sound like a real person, more like a recording of one heard through an exceptionally high-quality gramophone.

“Benson, for fuck’s sake, Maggie’s my guest, not a kebab wrapper.”

She became aware of something over her face and in a panic pulled off a clear mask that was cupped over her nose and mouth. After a few blinks Margritte could see that the strange pseudo-face was fixed on the metal shape she’d seen before she’d blacked out. It was standing next to Rupert. He came over as she realised she wasn’t in Convocation House but instead on a makeshift bed in the corner of a very plain room. There were no windows, only a large open doorway leading off into a wide corridor lit by electric lamps.

“That’s oxygen,” Rupert said, picking the mask up from where she’d dropped it. It was connected to a large metal cylinder. “You might want to keep it on a bit longer.” She shook her head. “How are you feeling?” He offered her a hand.

She accepted the help in sitting up. The bed felt springy and wobbled as she moved. “Awful. Where are we?”

“In the Stacks.”

“That means nothing to me.”

“Under the University. We’re in the Nether, we’ll be safe here. Take these.” He handed her two round white pills and then fetched her a glass of water from a nearby table.

She frowned at the tablets. “No, thank you.”

“It’s just ibuprofen for your headache.”

She shook her head again. “I just want to go home, thank you.”

He dropped them into a pocket with a shrug. “Soon. I’m just waiting for the Proctors to get something to me.”

The Proctors were the university police. Unlike the mundanes, Margritte knew they were also Arbiters. “Do they have any idea what happened?”

“They’ve found something important but I haven’t seen it yet. Oh, Maggie, meet Benson.”

She stared past him at the metal man. Aside from the two black discs suggesting eyes there was only a rectangular grill where the mouth would be on a man’s face. Its head was shaped like a soup tureen with a large black bowler hat on top. Its body was a large cylinder, the arms and legs thick metal tubes. The legs ended in wheels, the arms in a collection of tools, from a corkscrew and bottle opener to a small saw. There were different tools at the end of each arm but she could only see small parts of them when tucked away out of use.

“Isn’t he great?” Rupert said. “I wanted him to look kind of retro, you know, a homage to those Fifties sci-fi B-movie robots, but also a bit like a Proctor.”

“But…what is he?”

“A robot.” When he saw she didn’t understand the word he added: “An artificial man.”

Margritte was horrified. “But he spoke! Does he have a soul?”

“Christ! No! That would be bloody awful, being trapped inside…” He shuddered and then unclipped something at the back of its arm. Margritte realised the metal was just a cover, like armour. Beneath she could see its arm was made of something clay-like, every inch of it covered with symbols she didn’t recognise. “It’s not really a robot, I’m just yanking your chain. It’s a golem, with bells and whistles. It might sound like they know what they’re saying, but they don’t, it’s all just programmed responses, like a computer. No…that won’t help you understand.” He jerked a thumb at one of the doorways. “Hedges is over there. Say hi, Hedges.”

“Hi.” The voice sounded identical to that which had come from Benson.

Margritte felt nauseous. She was trapped underground with a Sorcerer and armoured golems and, if she wasn’t careful, she could panic. She checked her posture was correct. Going to pieces wasn’t going to achieve anything. “Could I trouble you for a cup of tea?”

“Benson, get us some tea, will you?” The golem rolled out of the room.

“How long was I asleep?”

Rupert sat on the bed next to her, making it creak. “A few hours. Benson picked both of us up and opened a Way to Hedges. You’re officially the first Fae-touched to have been rescued by any of my staff. Congratulations.”

“But how did he open a Way when you couldn’t?”

“It’s all to do with anchors. I was blocked from making contact with anchors in the building but it doesn’t matter for those two; they’re each other’s anchors, so Benson can always find Hedges and vice versa. Even if one of them was drifting in the Nether, nowhere near any reflected buildings, they’d still be able to find the other.”

“What if they were both drifting in the Nether?”

He grinned. “Then I would have majorly fucked up. One of them is always here. Can you walk?”

She stood up and, whilst her head was pounding, she was otherwise all right. “Yes. Are we leaving?”

“Let’s go to my office, it’s more comfortable there. I just kip here if I can’t be arsed to go home.” He offered his arm and she slipped her hand into the crook of his elbow, more out of politeness than anything else.

They walked out of the room and into a corridor lined with books from floor to ceiling as far as she could see, lit at regular intervals by bright lights hanging from the ceiling. “My goodness,” she said. “You meant the Bodleian’s underground book stacks, didn’t you? I thought that was just a myth.”

“That’s what I want everyone to think. There are miles of them under the city, all reflected into the Nether.”

“The books too?”

“Only the good ones.”

Hedges followed them as they walked and there was no sound save the golem’s wheels and the clip of her heels. The books they passed were uniformly bound in leather with dates embossed on the spines. She wondered why he was telling her so much and letting her see the place he slept in. The Sorcerers were famously reclusive—she didn’t even know the name of the Sorcerer of Essex though she’d lived in his domain for over two hundred years—but Rupert seemed more approachable than the majority of people in Society.

“I hope you don’t mind my enquiring, but why did you make Benson and Hedges? Don’t you trust real people?”

“The trouble with human beings is human error,” he replied. “Don’t get me wrong, I think people are great—the clever ones, that is—but that

doesn’t mean I’d want to rely on them. Here we are.”

Tucked between two bookcases was a door that he unlocked with a key fished out of his pocket. He flipped a light switch and revealed a room with a huge desk, a few filing cabinets and a sofa. The walls were covered with photographs and paintings of Oxford, and there was a framed Dalí.

“The Metamorphosis of Narcissus,” she said. “One of my favourites.”

“I like most of the stuff he did before his religious phase,” Rupert said, sweeping food wrappers off the sofa and onto the floor. “Shame that got to him too. Got a bit out of control, all that God stuff. Never mind. Sit down, make yourself at home.”

“A package has been deposited, sir,” Hedges said. “Would you like me to collect it?”

“Yeah, do that.” He looked at Margritte. “You warm enough?”

She nodded.

“That’s all, then,” he said to the golem and it rolled off.

Just as the lull in conversation was getting uncomfortable, Benson arrived with the tea. It was in a large earthenware mug, rather garishly painted, and stronger and with more sugar than she liked, but it still made her feel better. Rupert slurped his tea and gave a loud sigh of pleasure, which Margritte did her best to ignore.

Hedges returned soon after with a small box. Rupert abandoned his mug and opened the box on the desk. He pulled out a letter, read it quickly, then rummaged around in the top drawer of his desk until he found a pair of thick leather gloves covered in strange marks.

Margritte cupped her hands around the mug and watched Rupert lift a lump of clay out of the box. It had unfamiliar symbols carved into it and she realised it was something sorcerous. She looked away, choosing to stare at the Dalí painting rather than something she probably shouldn’t see.

“Well, fuck me sideways with a toothbrush,” Rupert murmured. “If this hadn’t been designed to kill me I’d think it was a thing of beauty.”

“Do you know who made it?”

“Not yet. Wessex or Northumbria, I reckon, they’re both pricks. Hedges —magnifier.”

The golem rolled over to him and the tools attached to its left arm rotated until a magnifying glass clicked into place and was extended into a position between the clay and Rupert’s eyes.

“Ekstrand, you sonofabitch!” He dropped the clay back in the box and swatted the magnifying glass away. Hedges rolled backwards into a corner as Benson left the room at speed, as if it had been frightened away by Rupert’s outburst. “The Sorcerer of Wessex tried to kill me! Us! What a bastard!”

“Is that a…usual problem?”

“Not without a declaration of war—in triplicate. It was totally out of the blue! He’s a weird bugger but even so, trying to murder someone because they’re better at solving riddles than you is a bit fucking extreme, don’t you think?”

Margritte just nodded. She wanted to go home.

“He’s always had it in for me.” Rupert’s rant was building up steam. “He got it into his head I wanted Bath. Why would I want that place? Boring shitty little city at the bottom of a valley with a few natural springs. Whoopdy-fucking-do! Nothing—”

“Wait!” Margritte held up a hand. “He’s the Sorcerer of Aquae Sulis?”

“It’s in his domain, yeah.”

“Oh, my.” She put the mug on the floor, having lost her appetite for tea. “William Iris helped him to rescue the Master of Ceremonies, just before he

moved to Londinium. That was the night the Rosas fell. Ekstrand turned up in the middle of a party because of William."

"Ekstrand working with an Iris?" Rupert shook his head. "Nah, he hates the puppets, always has."

"It's true. William found out what the Rosas were doing and got Ekstrand to rescue Lavandula. Or so they wanted everyone to believe."

"What are you getting at?"

"What if it was all a ruse to remove the Rosas so William could take Londinium?"

"Nah," Rupert shook his head. "Ekstrand playing politics with the Fae-touched? Not his style."

"But let's look at what's happened so far. The Rosa Duke of Londinium falls because William pins Lavandula's disappearance on them and convinces Ekstrand to report it to the King and Queen. Then William turns up in Londinium, makes a half-hearted attempt at running for the Dukedom, realises he can't get the support and so frames Bartholomew and legitimises his murder. Now Ekstrand attacks you, out of the blue. If you were killed, Oxenford would be thrown into chaos, making it ripe for the plucking. Ekstrand and the Irises move in and take it."

"Why haven't the Irises taken over Aquae Sulis?"

"Because they don't need to. They have the city sewn up with the Papavers. Oxenford is next on their list, I'm certain of it."

"I don't like the way you're making sense." Rupert looked back into the box. "I want to think you're just obsessed, you know, grief-stricken and seeing Iris plots everywhere but…fuck. It sounds plausible. I heard a rumour the Prince was pissed off with Iris—maybe it's because of this." He shook his head. "I'm sure there was something important I had to remember about Ekstrand…"

“Sir,” Benson was back at the doorway, holding several volumes of the leather-bound books with a sheet of paper on top. “Recent incidences of Northumbria, Wessex and Ekstrand. The most recent entry indexed under ‘Ekstrand’ is marked ‘critical’—would you like me to read it to you?”

“Yeah, go on.”

“Ekstrand has called a Moot. No fucking way I’m going to that when everything has gone tits up here. I’d rather f—”

Rupert snapped his fingers. “The Moot! Pull the footage the drones took and bring it to me on my laptop.”

“Moot?” Margritte asked.

“It’s when all the Sorcerers get together on neutral ground and have arguments about pissy little things when they’re not allowed to kill each other. Ekstrand called one a few weeks ago but I had my hands full here with all the Rosa fallout. I thought it would be a waste of time—he never brings anything interesting to the table. So I sent some of my drones to film it.”

“This seems like Sorcerer business,” Margritte said, getting up. The talk of drones and “filming” things made such little sense it was making her headache worse. “Perhaps it would be best if I went home now.”

“Soon, soon. I just want to see if anything—ah, put it here, Benson.”

The “laptop” appeared to be a smaller version of the computer she’d seen in Convocation House. She sat back down, regretting staying for that drink. She didn’t feel like she was being held prisoner, but he was hardly respecting her wish to leave. Did he need an audience? Perhaps he’d forgotten what it was like to have a human being around and couldn’t bear to have it end yet.

She’d learned more about the Sorcerers in the last ten minutes than in the last two hundred years. Was it simply that the Sorcerer of Essex was a

recluse and the others weren't, thereby giving her a skewed impression? It was a taboo subject in Society, the Sorcerers effectively being the jailers of their patrons. She wondered what Lord Tulip would make of it all. Was there any way she could turn it to her advantage?

Rupert was hunched over the screen and after a few minutes said, "But Ekstrand didn't even turn up. What kind of arsehole calls a Moot and then doesn't even show up for it?"

Margritte peered around his side and saw grainy pictures of the entrance to a castle's inner keep. "Perhaps he was just late," she suggested.

"I'll fast forward." He pressed a button and shoved his hands in his pockets. The picture didn't change but numbers in the bottom right corner sped through minutes then hours. "Looks like they went ahead without him; none of them have come out again. Hang on…" He tapped a button and the numbers froze. "What the fuck is that?"

Bizarre markings were appearing on the wall. Rupert moved his finger about on a square below the keys and the area being written on filled the screen. The symbols glowed briefly then disappeared.

"I don't know what the fuck is writing that," Rupert said. "Doesn't look like a ward kicking off. Not one I know anyway."

"Are they sorcerous symbols?"

He scratched his chin. "Kinda. Some of them." They watched the writing appear briefly all along the wall until it went out of sight down the side of the keep. Rupert sped the pictures up again. The symbols made a brief reappearance after presumably being written around the whole building, then went out of sight.

Rupert cracked his knuckles as he watched and it made Margritte shudder. "This is a bloody long Moot."

"Could that strange writing have trapped them inside?"

“Maybe. Oh, hang on, someone else has arrived.”

Margritte sat down, not wanting to watch. He could realise how much she’d seen already and she didn’t want to give him any more incentive to keep her there indefinitely.

“That’s Ekstrand and one of his Arbiters. The Arbiter’s checking the symbols disappeared—Ekstrand must have cast them out of shot. What the…is that a walking gargoyle?”

Margritte twitched, then resisted the urge to look, no matter how bizarre it sounded. She closed her eyes and let her head fall back onto the sofa cushion.

“Oh, Jesus. Oh, shit, no.”

She opened them to see Rupert twist to face her, as white as bone china.

“What’s wrong?”

“Ekstrand killed them.”

“Who?”

“The Sorcerers. He’s checking they’re all dead. Ekstrand and I are the only ones left.” He paused the footage and dropped onto the sofa next to her. She carefully laid a hand on his shoulder, wanting to console him, having been ripped apart by her bereavement so recently. She couldn’t help but feel sorry for him. He didn’t notice and she discreetly withdrew, thinking it better to keep her distance. “I can’t believe this. That’s why Ekstrand missed the Moot: he killed them all—except me. Look how pissed off he is—it’s because my body isn’t there.”

She glanced at the screen, saw the bodies laid out, then looked away again. “So Londinium is without a Sorcerer? North or South?”

“Yup.”

“And William Iris, friend of Ekstrand, is rather conveniently the Duke. How interesting.”

“That’s why Ekstrand tried to kill me,” Rupert said. “He wants to take the whole Heptarchy—make it one domain under him. And the Irises have two major cities in the Nether now. If they’re working together they’ll take Oxenford and then Jorvic. This is fucking huge.”

Margritte took a deep breath. “We need to work together. We have to protect Oxenford from the Irises and from Ekstrand.”

He nodded. “Hell, yeah. All right, let me get the Bod’ sorted and better protected. Then I’ll kill Ekstrand and help you take Londinium back, all right?”

“How will you do that?”

“Cut off the head of course,” he said. “We’ll get William Iris.” He stared at the screen. “After I’ve twatted Ekstrand.” He frowned. “I shouldn’t have let you see all this. But I wanted you to. That’s not good.”

Margritte’s mouth went dry. “You have my word that not a single detail of my time here, or what has happened to the Sorcerers, will leave my lips once you let me go home.”

He stared at her. “I shouldn’t have wanted you to stay. Maybe I should kill you, just to be sure.”

She leaned back. “Is that really necessary?”

He jumped up, making her heart fly into her throat. “Nah. That would suck. I like you, Maggie. Seems there’s enough death at the moment without me adding to it. Right?”

She steadied her breathing and nodded. “Yes, Rupert. You’re absolutely right.”

15

Sam rubbed his eyes and checked his watch. He'd been reading the files for almost six hours and it was the first time he'd paused. His stomach growled like a wild bear and now he was tuning back into his body he realised how thirsty he was. He slid the file into one of the boxes, replaced the lid and put it back in its place.

It felt like someone had gouged out his chest with a spoon. The things he'd read about would never go away, he would never be able to live his life in ignorance any more. There were people dying, suffering and struggling—that moment—all at the hands of Lord Iron and the other companies he worked with. If the devil was going to own a company, he'd be happy with CoFerrum Inc.

He went out and closed the door, leaving all of Leanne's letters there and taking only the keycard with him. As he walked through the warehouse, past other lock-ups containing other people's secrets, he decided not to call that Martin bloke yet. He didn't want to hand all that stuff over to a stranger and lose control of the real legacy Leanne had left him. No wonder she'd set up such a generous life-insurance package; she was always expecting to be found out and removed. Everything in that room had destroyed their marriage and he wasn't going to just pass it on and get on with his life like it had never happened. She could have set things up to give Martin the location of the stash, but she didn't, she trusted *him* with it. She wanted to explain what she'd done in such a way as to give him the chance to see what she had discovered. There was no way Leanne would ask him to help

directly, no way she'd want to put him at the same kind of risk she'd lived with, but some part of her wanted to hand it over to him. She wanted him to act, he was sure of it.

She didn't know that the head of the very corporation she was investigating had taken him under his wing. He had an advantage over the environmentalists, who would need the media and politicians to act, and Sam knew all too well they wouldn't do a thing. Iron's wealth probably had them all sewn up and Sam had no faith in them. Besides, the atrocities spanned continents and the international entanglements would need multiple governments and agencies to cooperate for anything to change. It would take months, if not years—even if they were able to do anything about it. He could go straight to the top and see if Iron was even aware of what his company was doing, and then threaten him with exposure if he refused to do anything.

He was just starting to formulate a plan when his mobile rang. It was his voicemail service so he listened to the message, relieved he wouldn't have to speak to anyone.

"Hi Sam, it's Cathy. New number again, I've texted you so you've got it. I lost my old one when we were attacked. I was just calling to make sure you're all right. Max came to see me and said you saved me from Lord Thorn and that your wife died and I wanted to say…I don't know, that I was thinking of you and hoping you're coping and stuff. Can you call and leave a message to let me know you're all right? I don't know when I'll next get a chance to—"

The message cut off—she'd run out of time—but there was a second one.

"Sorry, I was talking too much. I'm staying in the Nether, Sam, I'm not going to find a way out. The system is fucked here and the more I learn

about what's going on, the more I know I need to change it, but I can only do that from the inside. I'll pick up any messages you leave. If there's an emergency, or if you really need somewhere to be away from family or stuff like that, come to Spencer House near Green Park in London and ask for Morgan. He'll let you in and get me, but only do that if you really need to, all right? Take care, Sam. And thanks for helping me and Sophia."

He ended the call, and the text message with her number arrived. He called it straight away.

"Cathy, it's Sam. Don't stay there, you have to get out. I know you're scared of the Fae, I am too, but there has to be a way to be free of them. I have some stuff to take care of, then I'll be in touch."

When he pressed the key to end the call he realised he was shaking. Leanne had spent all those years thinking she could just get that little bit closer to the top and change the world; now Cathy was falling into the same trap. He almost called her back to tell her that her husband had threatened him, but decided against it. If she lost her temper at her husband he'd know they'd been in touch and she'd only get into trouble.

"It's all a fucking mess," he muttered. He had to go back to Lord Iron and sort him out. Then he had to go and find Cathy and make her realise she needed to get out before she ended up losing her life to a struggle she couldn't win.

The first thing Max saw when he woke was the gargoyle. It had been sitting in the same place all night, having gone there after Ekstrand's threat.

"We're going to do something, aren't we?" Its question sounded more like a statement.

Max nodded, dressed and went down to breakfast. There was no sign of Ekstrand. “He’s in his study,” Petra said when he checked the living room. “We’re not to disturb him.”

“There are Chapters all over the Heptarchy without a Sorcerer,” Max said. “He needs to take charge.”

Petra put down her book and looked at him properly. “I’m sure Mr Ekstrand has a plan.”

“Are you?”

“Are you going to patrol again today?”

“I want to see if Mr Ekstrand is going to give me any new instructions.”

“I told you, we’re not allowed to disturb him.”

Max was about to reply when Axon came to the doorway. “I think we need to.” He was holding a newspaper. “Look at this.”

He went to the coffee table and laid it before Petra, pointing to an article.

“Oxford scientist discovers Ekstrand Syndrome.” Petra read the headline and looked up at Axon with surprise.

“Go on,” he said and she looked back at the newspaper.

“An Oxford psychologist, Dr Rupert Superior, has announced the discovery of a new psychological disorder, one he claims could put the entire country at risk, if not the world, were it to go untreated. Coined ‘The Ekstrand Syndrome’ and identifiable by a simple set of psychological tests, this discovery, Dr Superior asserts, is the most significant since the work of Sigmund Freud. ‘The Ekstrand Syndrome consists of certain personality traits which can appear relatively harmless in isolation,’ Dr Superior said, ‘but when presenting as a cluster in one individual can pose a significant threat to society. I discovered it in a patient with long-term trust issues and an inferiority complex. He began to commit violent acts in order to further

his own egotistical fantasies and delusions about taking over the country. Unfortunately this patient is so dangerous that rather extreme measures needed to be taken to ensure the safety of others, but I believe that now the full extent of his problem—and the threat of the syndrome itself—have been identified, the individual will pose no further danger to innocent members of the public.' When asked how sufferers of Ekstrand Syndrome can be identified, Dr Superior replied, 'They are always men who believe themselves to be more intelligent than their peers despite repeated evidence to the contrary. They dedicate significant time and effort to trying to remove those considered a threat to their schemes and refuse to accept they might be wrong. Aside from the patient in question it's my belief a not insubstantial number of Conservative Party members also suffer from Ekstrand Syndrome.' Dr Superior has yet to publish a paper on the disorder."

The gargoyle was wheezing with suppressed laughter but Petra was ashen. She looked at the date at the top of the page. "He's still alive then. How did he get this into today's newspaper?"

"Maybe he put it in before the attack," Max suggested.

"I thought the same thing," Axon said. "Then I noticed this." He flipped forwards a few pages. "There's a piece here on a student prank involving a clay ball thrown at the Bodleian Library. It says, 'No damage was caused and the students in question will be severely reprimanded.' And in the puzzles page…here, there's a wordsearch that's clearly been tampered with."

Max moved to read the list. "Idiotic. Sorcerer. Failed. Murderer. Attempted. Inferior. Revenge. Retribution. Pride. Justice."

The gargoyle sniggered.

“This isn’t funny!” Petra said. “When Mr Ekstrand knows it didn’t work he’s going to be distraught.”

“He’s going to keep being obsessed,” the gargoyle said, not laughing any more.

Max didn’t want Axon and Petra to hear anything else the gargoyle might say. He had to find the person behind the murders before the last two Sorcerers in Albion killed each other. “I’ll leave you to tell Mr Ekstrand,” he said to Axon. “I have things I need to do.”

Will covered the letter he was writing when there was a knock on the door to his study.

“Mr Bertrand Persificola-Viola,” Morgan announced.

The younger Viola walked in, dressed in a Regency-style outfit with a superbly cut single-breasted tailcoat and high cravat. He was so much smarter than his brother Freddy, in more ways than one, Will suspected. Bertrand gave a formal bow and entered, heading for the chair on the other side of the desk that Will gestured to.

They shook hands before he sat down. “Thank you for accepting my request to speak with you, your Grace.”

“I assume it’s something important or you’d have said something at Black’s, earlier.” Will sat down. He also expected something was about to be raised off the record, or Bertrand would have visited him at the Tower.

“I wanted to be discreet, and to ensure a private conversation didn’t become the subject of gossip.”

“Would you like some brandy?”

“Thank you, your Grace, but no. I don’t drink alcohol.”

Will inclined his head in acknowledgement. The younger wanted to distance himself from Freddy in every way, it seemed.

“May I say, before we go on,” Bertrand said, “I understand the Duchess was kind enough to pay a social call to my wife earlier today. Charlotte was deeply touched and quite thrilled that Her Grace singled her out for the honour.”

Will smiled. Cathy’s gesture was perfectly timed. “My wife said she enjoyed the visit immensely.” He had no idea if that were so, but was planning to quiz her on the subject later.

“Your Grace, something has come to my attention that I believe you should be made aware of, if you haven’t been informed already. Several people are considering leaving Londinium to go and live in Oxenford.”

Will pressed his fingertips together, keeping his expression neutral. “People are free to live wherever they wish, if the ruler of the city permits it.”

“They’ve been personally invited to consider moving by Margritte Tulipa.”

He hadn’t expected that. “How many?”

“I know of ten but there may be more. All influential families, including my brother.”

“I know Freddy took Bartholomew’s death badly.”

Will watched a muscle work in Bertrand’s jaw. “My brother speaks first, thinks last. I apologise for his appalling behaviour at the first Court.”

“There’s no need for you to apologise for him. His actions aren’t your fault.”

Bertrand looked down. “He’s been to Oxenford and is waiting on the Hebdomadal Council for a formal invitation to move there. He’s trying to

persuade others to come with him and take their tithe from Londinium's coffers. I felt you should know."

Will almost thanked him, but stopped himself. He didn't want Bertrand to know it was the first he'd heard of it, or to appear beholden to him. "Have you received a letter from Margritte?"

"No, your Grace. It seems I've been overlooked."

Will didn't miss the bitterness in his voice and felt Margritte's omission had little to do with it. No doubt he'd been overlooked many times. "Older brothers can be difficult," Will said, adopting a more relaxed position. "Mine is said to be the most able swordsman in Albion. Every time I picked up a sword I was compared to him. I always fell short, but I didn't mind."

"Why? If I may be so bold."

"Because he deserves the acclaim. He *is* the best swordsman. If I was to be judged poorly thanks to his *inability* to wield a weapon it would be a different matter altogether. I wouldn't just be overlooked, or compared unfavourably, I'd be suffering an injustice."

Bertrand's eyes flicked over his face, as if he were searching Will's expression for any sign of something other than solidarity. "I had the impression that you're going to be a Duke with a strong sense of justice."

"Indeed." Will nodded. "A Duke must do all he can to ensure the people under his care are able to be all they can be. Whether that's ensuring they can travel safely or simply helping them to solve their personal problems, it's all equally important." Bertrand was nodding slowly, listening with total attention. "Wherever I perceive an injustice it's my duty to ensure something is done."

"You've already demonstrated that, your Grace. So many in Londinium are nothing but words, but you act decisively to protect those under your care."

Will smiled to mask the uncomfortable flash of memory. He had acted decisively but he'd killed the wrong man. "I do all I can to make sure those I love—and those who are loyal to me—have the very best of my protection and care. I hope, when people realise this, they can feel confident and secure enough to act decisively themselves, to make their lives all they can be."

"Even if they had to do something…radical?"

"If I believed it was for the good of Londinium, yes. Sometimes a forest has to have a great tree felled to give enough light for others to grow. It's a radical act, but for the good of the whole."

Bertrand's chest swelled and his eyes glistened with the implicit permission he'd just been granted. "I won't take a moment more of your time, your Grace, I'm sure you are very busy."

Will stood and extended his hand which Bertrand shook enthusiastically. "My door is always open to you, Bertrand. I'm better able to help if kept well informed."

"I'll bear that in mind, your Grace." Bertrand bowed and left.

Will sat back down and took up his pen. There was another knock on the door. "The Marquis of Westminster is here, your Grace."

"That time already?" He covered the letter again. "Show him in, Morgan, and bring us a bite to eat."

"Very good, sir."

Tom soon entered and they shook hands. Whilst he wasn't as uptight as Bertrand had been, Tom was far from relaxed. "I trust you're well, your Grace?"

"Tom, please. We're in my house. Call me William." He went to the tantalus on the sideboard behind him. "Brandy?"

“No, thank you. I have the report. Would you like me to leave it with you?”

“How about giving me a summary now? Do you have time?”

“Of course.”

Will waved a hand at one of the twin sofas in front of the fire and sat opposite Tom. Whilst he settled into the corner with an arm on the rest and his legs crossed, Tom remained bolt upright as he looked through the sheaf of paper in his hands. That he and Cathy had been brought up in the same household still amazed Will.

“I’ve interviewed all the victims who came forward and some interesting findings have emerged. One of the most important is that there’s more than one team of robbers.”

“That’s interesting,” Will said. “How—”

There was one knock on the door and it opened. Cathy marched in. “What’s going on?”

“Catherine!” Tom stood. “The Duke and I are having a private meeting.”

Cathy’s hands were on her hips. “So this is how it is, then? The ladies sit and embroider while the men talk about all the important things?”

“Catherine,” Tom’s voice was stern. “Don’t be so rude.”

Will watched with interest as the old family pattern emerged. Cathy continued to ignore her brother, her eyes fixed on Will.

“I can contribute,” she said. “If I’m clever enough to be a good Duchess, let me be more than someone who sits next to you in the Court and has tea with wives.”

Tom turned to Will. “I’m so sorry, she’s always been difficult.”

“Tom!”

Will held up a hand. “You’re right,” he said to Cathy. Tom would be on his side no matter what, but he had to win Cathy over completely. He couldn’t bring himself to use anything that overpowered her emotions again, especially not after having been a victim of it himself, so he needed to do all he could to bring them closer together. And she was right, she wasn’t stupid.

Her smile made her features softer and he found himself smiling back. “Thank you,” she said.

“Come and sit next to me, my love. Tom was telling me what he’s found out about these highwaymen.”

Tom sat down, took a deep breath and focused on the pages again. “As I was saying…there are several groups of robbers—the attacks on multiple carriages are simultaneous and in different parts of Londinium. Jewels and money are stolen, as would be expected. The carriages are never attacked on the way to or from the Court. Only large banquets, balls and soirées.”

“I wonder why that is…” Will said.

“There must be something that people don’t take to Court,” Cathy said.

“There’s a tradition in Londinium,” Will said with a snap of his fingers. “No Charms in the Court that can influence the way one looks or how persuasive one might be to others. That’s why the old room at Somerset House was lined with mirrors, so people could always check a person’s reflection if they were in doubt.”

“So they want jewellery that’s Charmed,” Cathy said. “That’s interesting. Did you get descriptions of the things stolen?” she asked Tom, who nodded.

“Yes, a mixture of Charmed and plain jewellery. All sorts of things, from tiaras to cufflinks.”

“Will,” Cathy said, “you should get someone to look at the mundane auction houses.”

“What for?”

“I doubt the highwaymen are stealing jewels to wear themselves. I bet they’re selling on the pieces that aren’t Charmed, and they’ll be going through a fence to do that.”

Will and Tom frowned at her. “A what?” Tom asked.

“A fence is someone who takes stolen goods and sells them for a profit, taking a cut for themselves. The good ones can get fake proof of ownership for the really expensive pieces and they have loads of contacts willing to take stuff off their hands in return for a lower price.”

“How the devil do you know that?” Will asked and Tom fidgeted.

“I saw it in a TV show in Mundanus,” Cathy replied. She noticed Tom’s discomfort. “Don’t worry, Will knows all about that.”

Tom’s surprise was evident. “Oh. I see.”

“Auction houses are the best place to sell good pieces,” Cathy continued. “They’re more likely to have specialist buyers and collectors who’ll pay more for rare jewels. Necklaces and so on that we wear in the Nether are usually the highest quality, so they get better prices, too.”

Will was glad he’d let her stay. “All this from a TV show?”

“Oh…well, the fence stuff, yes. I used an auction house…” She glanced at Tom. “I sold my coming-of-age jewels to fund my time there.”

“Catherine Rho—” Tom cut himself off. “That’s a terrible, terrible thing to do. Those were a gift, not to mention a family heirloom you should pass to your daughter.”

“I felt that freedom was a more valuable gift,” she replied. “But of course, you never did understand that.”

The tension between them was something Will had only glimpsed in the past. He recalled the time Tom had dropped her off at the restaurant in Aquae Sulis after the first ball of the season. No wonder their relationship had been so strained, and still was—Tom was ashamed of her behaviour. The amount of stress that must have been endured in the household before that first ball must have been intense. He wondered if that was why he'd never heard anything of Tom's Grand Tour. Had it been sacrificed in the search for his runaway sister? No wonder there was animosity between them.

"I think that's very useful information, Cathy, thank you," he said and squeezed her hand. "Tom, do you have anything else?"

"Only a theory," he replied, all business again. "I've been considering how multiple groups of highwaymen could possibly know when and where to target carriages on miles of roads in the Nether. I thought about various military campaigns and how even the seemingly insignificant parts of a system can actually provide critical intelligence. I think they must have contacts at the stables. There are seven reflected into the Nether in London, and all the people robbed used one of them on the night they were attacked. It would be a simple matter for a spy to see people set off in their finery and send a message detailing who was inside and where they were going."

Will nodded. "Yes, it makes perfect sense. No one would ever think of the staff either—they're always overlooked. This is excellent work, Tom, thank you." He smiled at Cathy. "And thank you, my love. It seems we can make a good team."

She gave Tom a nervous glance. "I'm sorry about the jewels."

Tom gathered his notes, not looking at her. "Don't tell Mother what you did, for goodness' sake."

"Of course not. I'm not an idiot."

“I think I can handle it from here,” Will said. He stood, shook hands with Tom and they watched him leave. Will caught hold of Cathy’s hand, pulling her up into an embrace. “Your poor brother,” he said. “You traumatised him with your wilful behaviour. He didn’t know how to handle you coming in like that.”

A moment of sadness crossed Cathy’s face. “We used to be close. Not any more. I don’t think he’ll ever forgive me. You didn’t seem to mind though, and you’re the Duke.”

“And your husband,” Will said and kissed her, weaving his fingers into her hair and holding her waist tight against him. He felt her tense up at the initial contact and then soften into the kiss. He closed his eyes and tried not to think about Amelia.

16

Max pulled the ivy around the gargoyle's neck, adjusting it until the soul chain was hidden. "If you don't move too much and keep most of your body behind the guttering it should be out of sight."

"This is going to be brilliant," it replied.

"Don't get carried away. As soon as we spot one of them you need to tone it down, and when they get close you need to keep still so they use the Sniffer. When he tries to climb up then you need to use the—"

"I know, I know," it replied. "Don't worry, it's going to work." It took the Opener from Max and put it between its teeth.

"I'm not worried," Max said but the gargoyle was already climbing up the wall. When it reached the top it leaped across to the top of the portico and up to the guttering at the corner of the church. Once he was satisfied the gargoyle was in position, the Opener tucked away and the soul chain still hidden, Max hid in the doorway across the narrow London street. It had taken hours to find the right place but once he had it had been no trouble to bring the gargoyle through from Aquae Sulis and formulate the plan. Now it was just a matter of waiting for an Arbiter to turn up so he could be tracked back to the corrupted Chapter's cloister.

"Hey!" the gargoyle shouted at a young man walking by. "Hey you, short-arse! Hey, look at me when I'm trying to insult you!"

The man stopped and looked at the church. The gargoyle waved and the man jolted.

“Yes, it’s me,” the gargoyle yelled. “What are you wearing? Is that supposed to be a hat? You put your Mum’s tea cosy on instead.”

As expected, the young man pulled his mobile phone out of his pocket and began filming as the gargoyle blew raspberries at him. “Are you another actor?” he asked. “Are you from the same people who did the Nelson stunt?”

“Nelson?” The gargoyle pulled a face as if he’d just smelt a rotten egg. “Nelson was an amateur. No charisma. I’m so much more interesting than him.”

“Don’t take it too far,” Max whispered under his breath.

“That’s so cool,” the man said. “I’m posting this right now.”

“Yeah, you do that,” the gargoyle said. “Make me famous.”

Max hoped the ivy was doing a good enough job. Whilst it wasn’t ideal having the gargoyle made famous on the mundane virtual library network, it wasn’t as if anyone in the Nether used it and besides, he could hardly take the gargoyle out and about in Mundanus anyway. There was no other way to find one of the London Arbiters so efficiently.

Then he saw Faulkner at the end of the street. He remembered him from the café on Judd Street. Max got the bug ready, activating it so the claws sprang open, ready to catch onto the fabric of the Arbiter’s coat. He had a spare in case he missed, but he still needed Faulkner to get closer.

“Have you seen this?” the first man asked and then looked back at the gargoyle, disturbed by Faulkner’s manner. “He was saying a lot more a few minutes ago.”

Faulkner got out a mobile phone and made a call as he walked down the street to stand next to the other spectator. The gargoyle pulled faces for a minute or so, then stopped when Faulkner ended his call.

“Aw, show’s over,” the young man said. “I’m going to see if I can find the wires or the battery. No one knows how they did Nelson, maybe—”

Faulkner shook his head. “I wouldn’t if I were you.” He flashed an ID at the young man. “Move along.”

“Bloody hell, it’s just a bit of fun,” the man said. “The filth are all fascists these days!” He ran off.

As predicted, Faulkner got out a Sniffer and began winding it. He was less than ten feet away. Max placed the bug on the palm of his hand, lined it up as best he could and then flicked it with his forefinger. It landed just above the belt of his coat and crawled away beneath the waistband, geared as it was to seek out a dark crease upon landing. Satisfied, Max gave the gargoyle a curt nod and slipped away, limping without using his stick so the sound wouldn’t alert the Arbiter. By the time he was in the next street he knew the gargoyle had opened a Way in the church roof and escaped into the Nether driveway of Mr Ekstrand’s house whilst Faulkner had been trying to find a gate into the churchyard. Mission accomplished.

Sam pulled the iron out of the coals and laid it on the anvil, then, pausing only to wipe the sweat from his forehead, he struck it with the hammer. He’d barely slept, he’d hardly eaten but when he worked the iron he didn’t feel it. It was the only thing he could bear to do as he waited for Lord Iron to come back from his latest trip.

The strikes upon the red metal rang through the forge and he felt each one through the gloves, up his arm and into his chest. His blows were hammering the blunt stump into a flatter point, “drawing down” as the blacksmith had taught him. He didn’t have a particular piece in mind; he just wanted to practise the basics. He’d made a few curls, slit a few pieces

and made some holes, each time the technique felt easier. At school he'd barely been able to wield a coping saw in woodworking class yet here he was, doing something totally practical with relative ease. His teacher wouldn't recognise him.

"I hardly recognised you," said a voice at the door. "I thought you were Bob."

Sam left the hammer where it had last struck and looked at Lord Iron. "I've been waiting for you."

Iron was dressed in his usual Savile Row suit, looking effortlessly immaculate as he always did. His shoes shone against the muddy stones at the threshold. "Looks like you're well on the way to becoming a blacksmith. Bob said you'd taken to it well."

"Seems I'm good at something after all," Sam replied, thrusting the metal's tip back into the coals. "Shame it's not two hundred years ago. How was the trip?"

"Very good. Made some progress with a European partner and scoped out some—" He smiled. "You're not interested in all of that."

Sam just worked the bellows and watched the fire, not knowing how to start to say what he needed to.

"I understand you went back to Bath. Are you satisfied with the way everything's been handled?"

He nodded.

"If the house doesn't sell in the next week I'll get a team of stagers in. They dress the house neutrally, apparently it makes it easier for people to imagine living there themselves."

Sam pulled out the metal and laid it on the anvil. He beat it again and tried to ignore the fact he was being watched.

“Drawing down,” Iron said. “It looks like you’ve been doing it for weeks rather than days. You really do have a gift. What about the other six?”

“Six what?”

“Bob must have taught you the seven core skills; splitting, curls—”

“Yeah, all those.”

When he paused to see his progress, Iron came closer to inspect the work. “This is the only craft that every other craft depends upon, and the only one where functionality and art are truly fused.” When Sam didn’t say anything, Iron carried on. “People used to fear blacksmiths, you know, as much as they needed them.”

“Bob told me about that.”

“Good. It’s important to know these things.”

The metal had cooled too much to be worked any more. Sam picked it up to put back into the fire, but changed his mind and lay it back down on the anvil. “I know more about you, too. I know what your business does, all over the world.”

“I’ve never hidden that from you. I gave you that tour—”

“You gave me a tour of the clean bits, the offices and the paper work and the fucking PowerPoint presentations. You didn’t tell me about the stuff you’re doing in the Congo and the things you’ve been covering up in South Africa and Chile. The acid rain and thousands of hectares of land you’re just fucking up forever to make a quick buck. You make out that you’re refined and the whole time you’re living off the blood and deaths of people and nature, and helping your mates to cover up their shit too. I know all of it.”

Iron appeared to be unmoved. “They say childhood ends when you understand the ugliness of the world.”

“Don’t fucking patronise me! Your company has committed atrocities that make BP and Shell look like humanitarian organisations! And don’t tell me your company is so huge that you don’t know everything that happens at the lower levels because I won’t believe it.”

“I do know. I know everything that happens, in ways you can’t possibly appreciate. Yet.”

“So you just don’t give a shit as long as the wheels keep turning, is that it? Profit is more important than people, right?”

“It’s not the profit.”

“Oh, so you get a sense of personal satisfaction from being the most evil man in the world? The obscene wealth is just a bonus.”

Iron looked down at the foot of the anvil. There was no defensiveness, no anger, just…Sam couldn’t work it out. Resignation? Was he so at ease with himself and the awful things he did that he felt nothing?

“There’s a lake in Chile that’s so acidic everything in it has died and the land for miles around it can’t support any life. There are conditions in a mine in South Africa that are so bad the average life expectancy of the men who work there—work for you!—is less than forty. Doesn’t any of that make you feel anything?”

“It makes me feel incredibly sad.”

Sam chucked the hammer to one side and jabbed him in the chest with his gloved finger, leaving a black smudge on his tie. “Then why don’t you do something about it?”

“I can’t.”

“You won’t, more like.”

“No, Sam, I’m literally incapable of stopping all of this. I’ve wanted to, for a long time, but it’s…just what I am.”

Sam gripped the metal he'd been working tight. "That's such bullshit. You're incapable of picking up the phone and saying, 'Let's pay those people proper wages and, while we're at it, let's spend some of these profits on cleaning up the mess we've made.'"

Iron shook his head. "Have you ever known anyone with an addiction? You can find them over a toilet, throwing up their guts, losing everything in their life and say to them, 'Just stop drinking' and it's simply impossible for them. Even when it's obvious it's killing them."

"Alcoholics can recover," Sam said, the metal rattling against the anvil as he struggled to rein in his anger.

"Neugent killed Leanne, but I was the one who made him into the thing he is now." Iron stared at the anvil. "I do that. I'm poisonous without even trying to be. Everything I've ever done in my life has been part of this…this natural talent. When I became Lord Iron it was amplified—the company machine grew and took over until it propagated itself endlessly. It isn't just me, it's the people I've hired, the ethos of the companies I own. I'm the root of all of it and it won't change just because I have a moment of clarity."

Sam didn't know what to make of what he was saying. Was it depression? Self-pity? Or was there something else involved, something unbelievable like the Fae and that world they lived in? Questions and worries surfaced again about the wedding rings and the railing at the park and the plugs that formed in his wounds, but he didn't want to lose focus. "Of course you can change it. We could go to the house, right now, and you could close the business down."

"It doesn't work like that."

"Oh, for fuck's sake!" Sam lifted the metal and struck the anvil with it, the dull clang filling the forge. "People are dying, people are being

murdered and poisoned by the only air they have to breathe and you have to take some responsibility for it!”

“I am,” Iron said, looking at him in the eye again. “That’s why you’re here.”

“Eh?”

Iron lifted the tip of the metal, ending its vibrating song, and inspected its tip as Sam wondered whether to pull it away from him and whack him over the head with it. “I’ve tried so many times to find the right one and they end up killing the best people around them. Neugent was the last. I realised it was all my fault—when I got too involved the poison in me would leech into them. Just like CoFerrum, just like everything else in my life. But I have the solution now, and that’s why I’ve brought you here and tested you and had you taught. Because you can take on the mantle and do something better with it.” He smiled. “Everything’s going to be all right, Sam.”

And then he threw himself forwards, still holding the tip of the metal and directing it to his chest. It pierced him before Sam even fully registered what he was doing and he tried to let go of the other end of it with a horrified cry. His hand didn’t co-operate, as if his fingers and palm were magnetised to it. Sam staggered backwards as Iron pushed himself forwards, further onto the spike of metal, an awful wet gurgling erupting from his throat as bubbles of blood emerged from his mouth and died on his lips.

Sam hit the wall of the forge, the blunt end of the metal now against his own chest, Iron’s eyes still fixed on him and now only inches away from his own. He could smell the blood and felt it spray onto his face as Iron coughed. The metal felt hot again, even through his glove, and he feared his own heart was going to be pierced as the pressure built.

Iron’s smile was fading and his skin looked like it was made of wax. Sam struggled to breathe as the heat from the metal penetrated the thick leather apron, then his shirt, and flooded into his chest. He shook violently and felt a warm liquid running down his leg as the last rattling sigh escaped from Iron’s lips and he became a dead weight at the other end of the shaft. As he collapsed Sam was pulled down with him, still unable to release the metal. Iron’s blood ran down the shaft and over the gloves, dripping off the cuffs and onto his wrists as Sam heaved his chest up and down, feeling like the air was drowning him.

17

Cathy waited for Carter on the lower floor of the bookshop, conveying her apologies and embarrassment with one glance at Jane. His footsteps clumped across the floor above them, did a circuit of the room with the fireplace and then made their way back. When he came down the stairs, Cathy hoped he didn't have something on him that would detect the Charm to open the Way to the Nether reading room.

"Everything seems in order," he said. "I'll sit here whilst you browse, if that doesn't get in your way?"

"That's fine," Cathy said. "We'll be upstairs, that's where…the best books are."

"And the comfy chairs," Jane added. "Shall we go up?"

"It's so kind of you to open after hours for me," Cathy said to her as they went upstairs, purely for Carter's benefit. As long as he didn't come up too—which she doubted—everything would be fine.

They went to the stained-glass door at the far end of the shop and Jane got the key ready. "If he starts coming up the stairs I'll tell him you're in the reading booth." She opened the door to reveal a little cubby with another comfy chair in it. "Then I'll come through and warn you, all right?"

"Thanks," Cathy said as the door was closed and the key inserted. "I'm sorry to be a bother. It's such a pain in the arse, all of this bodyguard bobbins, but it's the only solution I could think of."

"It's no trouble," Jane said and then unlocked the door. "Everyone else is already here. Enjoy!"

Cathy stepped across the shimmering threshold and into the secret reading room. This time it was full of people; she counted ten men and women, all evidently from the Great Families. A young woman who looked very much like Charlotte stood up.

“Your Grace!” she said and the conversation died, along with Cathy’s confidence.

Cathy reminded herself this wasn’t like a normal salon. “I’m Cathy,” she said. “Miss Rainer was my Governess and…and I think she used to organise this, am I right?”

Everyone nodded but they were still staring at her. She could feel the skin on her neck burning, and in moments the sensation reached her cheeks. “Um…I don’t want to screw this up, just because I’m the Duchess. I knew Miss Rainer before I became Duchess, it shouldn’t get in the way.”

“Of course not!” the woman said. “We’re so sorry, we knew a new person was coming but we had no idea it was you! I understand you’ve met my mother, Charlotte? I’m Emmeline and this is my brother, Benedict.”

Emmeline made the introductions and Cathy rapidly forgot all the names. Only two others were Londinium residents; the others came from all over Albion. A woman said she was from Aquae Sulis but Cathy didn’t recognise her.

“This is so exciting!” Emmeline said, leading her to one of the chairs. “We haven’t had a new member in four years! How is Miss Rainer? Where is she teaching now? Why hasn’t she been in touch with us?”

“We feared something had happened to her,” Benedict said. He was handsome but still boyish. Cathy suspected he hadn’t yet been packed off on his Grand Tour.

Everyone was looking at her. “She’s not…herself any more,” Cathy replied. “My parents discovered she was teaching me something

worthwhile and complained to the Agency. I managed to track her down and…well, it's not good." There was a collective sense of grief. All of their lives had been touched by Miss Rainer. "But I promise I'm going to find a way to restore her."

"She's not the first," Emmeline said, glancing at her brother.

"We need to stay positive though," Benedict said and others agreed. "It's what she would want."

"I couldn't agree more," Cathy said as she sat down. "So. What have I missed?"

"Emmeline recited a very moving poem," said the woman from Aquae Sulis. "And Benedict has brought something to share, haven't you?"

"I've written an essay," he said, patting a leather wallet resting on his lap. "And Alicia, didn't you say you had some thoughts about the Suffragettes you wanted to discuss?"

Alicia, a lady from Jorvic, nodded. Cathy looked at the others but they just seemed to be waiting for something. "And then what happens?"

Emmeline frowned. "And then we have tea and decide what next month's theme should be."

"Hang on…is this just a discussion group?"

"Yes," Benedict replied. "Were you expecting something else?"

"I didn't know what to expect, I just found an old invite. I thought there would be planning, you know, working out what to do about Society. Taking action!"

Emmeline sank in her seat and Benedict took a sudden interest in his shoes.

"I mean, why else are you meeting?" Cathy pressed. "Surely you're trying to work out how to change things for the better?"

“There used to be more of us,” Benedict said. “Men and women who were like you. Who wanted to be more…active and vocal about our cause in Society.”

Cathy wondered if they’d split and she’d found her way to the cowardly half of the group. “Where do they meet?”

“No, you don’t understand,” Emmeline said. “They were removed from Society and replaced by less troublesome spouses, or cursed in such a way as to make it impossible for them to cause any scandal. Like our mother.”

“Charlotte was such a pioneer,” Alicia said. “When she spoke, we felt like we could do anything!”

“But she took it too far,” Benedict said. “She was too passionate and she humiliated Father. If she wasn’t Lady Violet’s favourite she would have been replaced like all the others.”

Cathy thought back to her visit, how lovely Charlotte was. She could imagine the Fae adoring her beauty and the trouble that would bring. “Which family was she born into?”

“She was from Mundanus,” Emmeline said. “She was spotted by our father on the way home from a Suffragette rally. He had no idea what she’d been doing.”

“He stole her,” Benedict said, the anger straining his voice.

“But that’s a breach of the Treaty,” Cathy said.

“It happens all the time,” Alicia said. “Didn’t you know?”

She didn’t. Cathy sat back, appalled at how naive she was. From ignoring where the servants came from and how they could be treated, to discovering that mundane women could be kidnapped from Mundanus without anyone caring or doing anything about it, made her feel sick. What else was she ignorant of?

She considered telling Max about what had happened to Charlotte, but if she'd been taken in the early nineteenth century her family would be dead. Would she want a life in which she had the freedom she'd been fighting for without knowing a soul? And modern life was so different, it could be too much of a shock. It explained why she'd changed Miss Rainer's fortunes; Charlotte had brought radical ideas into Nether Society with her and Rainer had been spreading them ever since.

"What happened to the others? You said they were replaced." She'd heard of that at least, but she wasn't exactly sure what it meant.

"They're sent away and never come back," Emmeline whispered. "No one knows where they're taken nor what happens to them."

"We don't even know if they're still alive," Benedict added.

Cathy worried a button on her glove, the sombre mood of the room being the last thing she'd expected. "I don't suppose one of them was Clarissa Arvensis-Ranunculus?" She was one of Miss Rainer's students, one whose file ended abruptly with the cryptic code she'd asked Max to decipher in her last letter to him.

"Yes!" Emmeline said. "Do you know what happened to her?"

"No, she was just someone I hoped to meet." She ran through the other names she could remember and the assembled confirmed that all had been replaced. None of them had been Londinium families, at least none of any note, so Max was the best bet in tracking them down. "I'll look into it," she said.

"Shall I read my essay now?" Benedict asked.

"No, wait," Cathy held up a hand. "I know I've just got here but I'm sorry, I'm not taking the risk to sneak out just to listen to an essay." When Benedict's young face displayed his sadness she said, "I'm sure it's really interesting, but I can read essays at home."

“We can’t,” Emmeline said pointedly.

“But what I mean is that if we’re all taking the risk being here, let’s put it to better use. Let’s work out what we can do to find others like us. And we need a way to communicate securely with each other. We need to plan who we need to talk to and get on side, what we can say to them and who we think might be sympathetic.”

The group wouldn’t meet her eyes. No one said anything. Alicia took a breath but only to cough delicately into a handkerchief.

“I’m sorry, your Grace,” Emmeline finally said. “It’s too dangerous. We take comfort in each other and this keeps us from madness, but we aren’t the kind of people you’re looking for. They stood up for our rights and look what happened.”

“What do you think the Suffragettes endured?” Cathy stood up, unable to keep calm in the face of such cowardice.

“The Suffragettes didn’t have to contend with Charms and the Fae,” Benedict said.

“No, they had to contend with the police and prison officers who force-fed them and people jeering at them on the street and their own families turning against them. What kind of feminists do you think you are if all you’re prepared to do is just hide away in a bloody bookshop and talk?”

“Living ones,” Emmeline said, now standing too. “I’m sorry we haven’t met your expectations, and I’m sorry we’re not as brave—and reckless—as my mother, but we’ve lost people and seen with our own eyes what horrors can be committed.”

“So have I!” she shouted and immediately regretted it. Cathy held up her hands, ashamed of herself. “I’m sorry. I thought that if there were other people who had the same values we could actually achieve something.”

“Having the same values does not mean we believe the same action should be taken,” Benedict said. “If this group isn’t what you want then, respectfully, your Grace, perhaps you need to look elsewhere.”

She scanned the faces. All were nervous and tense. They were probably afraid she was going to force them into doing something by virtue of her status or that she’d do something that would lead others to them who would cart them off too. They were frightened and she didn’t have the right to tell them how to protest, any more than she had the right to be angry with them for not being what she’d hoped.

“I think I do,” she said. “I’m sorry I…sorry to disrupt your evening. I won’t bother you again.”

“Oh, your Grace, you’d be most welcome to discuss and debate with us,” Alicia said nervously. “Just…nothing more.”

Cathy managed a sad smile. “It’s not enough for me,” she said and left them to it.

Jane was waiting on the other side of the Way. “That was quick.”

“It wasn’t what I was hoping for,” Cathy said. “Thank you for being so accommodating though.”

She went down the stairs slowly, heavy with disappointment. Carter stood as she approached the door. “Did they not have any books to your taste, your Grace?”

“No,” she said. “I need to find what I’m looking for elsewhere.”

Will looked at the house through the raindrops rolling down the taxi’s window. Why did it always rain when he had business in Mundanus? It looked unassuming enough, a terraced townhouse in Pimlico with iron

railings outside and a neat row of clipped hedges in a window box. There were steps down to the basement level and steps up to the black front door.

He couldn't have found it without Tom, who may not have had the political connections but did have a talent for investigation. Tom's instincts about the stables had been correct and he'd followed each of the leads diligently, writing it all up and delivering the evidence to him in a dossier that read more like an academic paper. The house he looked at now was at the root of the criminal network.

"This the one then?" the driver asked.

"Yes." Will paid him and got out, opened the umbrella and directed it against the wind.

There was a light on in the living-room window and he could see an alcove full of books and a potted plant. The walls were white with a bold piece of modern art dominating the space above the fireplace. He couldn't see much more but it was already evident that the woman living there was wealthy.

He had several Charms ready to use, should the woman elect to fight him instead of accepting her fate. He wondered whether to use the Clear Sight Charm he'd purchased only an hour before, but didn't want to suffer the ill effects afterwards. He took a deep breath, adjusted the way the Glamoured sword rested against his thigh, and crossed the road.

The door knocker was a traditional lion's head holding a thick circle in its jaws. It made a satisfying clunk against the door. He heard footsteps in the hall and the door was opened by a woman in her thirties. She was slender with long black hair and wore a suit. There was a smile on her face which faded when she saw him.

"Not who you were expecting," he said.

"No. And you are?"

“The Duke of Londinium.”

She paled as she looked him up and down. “Come in.”

He looked at the threshold carefully before stepping through. It appeared to be clean and very mundane. The hallway had a polished oak floor and a cat sat on a console table, watching him with large amber eyes. Its fur was the same colour as the Nether’s mists. The sight of it reassured him he would just be walking into the house as opposed to an unknown location in the Nether, so he went in. She closed the door behind him after a quick glance out onto the street.

“What do you want?”

“You haven’t even shown me into your living room yet, Dr Tate. We may be in Mundanus but surely we don’t need to behave like savages. I know you were brought up well at least.”

He could see she was terrified. It made him more certain the conversation would go his way but didn’t make him feel good. He’d had his fill of destroying lives. No, he corrected himself, it may not come to that.

“I would offer you a drink but I doubt you’d accept it,” she said as he followed her into the living room.

“That’s right. And I’d rather you didn’t either. I’m sure you understand why.”

“So you know all about me.” She sat in a leather chair near the window. “Or so you want me to believe.”

He sat on the sofa. It was a nice room, tastefully decorated. “I know you have a lucrative business underpinned by crime. I know you used to live in the Nether until your father decided it was more important to bed the wife of a friend than protect his family. I know you somehow managed to escape the Collectors and have been missing for over ten years, presumed dead.”

He watched her throat move as she swallowed. “I can only assume, seeing as you’re paying a personal visit, that you don’t plan to turn me over to the Agency.”

Will nodded. “The ones you paid to rob the people of Londinium are in their custody now.”

“All four teams?” she asked.

“All five,” he replied. “Nice try.”

She licked her lips. “Sure you don’t want a drink?”

“They stole jewellery for you. You sold on the plain pieces and kept the Charmed ones to extract the magic trapped inside them whilst you obtained the other ingredients needed to make new products. These ingredients include a vast range of human emotions, from despair to love. I understand you take your time and cultivate your…patients until they’re ready to be emotionally harvested.”

“So you do know everything,” she sighed. “But you don’t want to turn me in. Which means you either want to kill me or use me. Which is it going to be?”

The door creaked as the cat pushed it open further and rubbed against her legs. She picked it up and put it on her lap.

“What’s she called?”

“*He* is called Henry. And I’d rather you just get on with it.”

“I’m not going to kill you,” Will said. “What do you think I am, some sort of gangster?”

“You’re an Iris, right?” At his nod she smiled. “You’re a gangster. Perhaps Daddy hasn’t told you yet.”

He stiffened, then laughed. “It takes more than that to upset me. I’m not going to kill you because I admire your work. The operation is really quite remarkable. It’s also mine, now.”

She tickled the cat behind her ears and purring soon filled the room. “But you’ve destroyed one of the most critical parts of my supply chain.”

“I’m merely replacing it with my own. I will supply all the Charmed artefacts you require. And I know exactly what you’ve stolen and when, so I know what kind of demand there will be. I won’t have to rob innocent people to satisfy your quota.”

“Innocent?” After a moment’s thought she added, “The pieces need to be first generation—Charmed by the Fae themselves—can you handle that?”

“Yes. That won’t be a problem.” He was planning to request pieces as part of his tithe and any shortfall could be made up by Lord Iris, he was certain of it.

“And your cut will be…?”

“Modest. You can continue to live your illegal life in the manner to which you have become accustomed.”

Tate looked at the cat and smiled as it looked back up at her. “And what about our two customers? I’m not sure they’ll be very happy about this. It does muddy things somewhat.”

He’d been fascinated to discover the criminal operation supplied the Agency and the Emporium of Things in Between and Besides directly. “Oh, there’s no need for you to worry about them.” Will smiled. “It’s not as if there are alternative suppliers for them to go to. And the Shopkeeper’s no fool. He’ll understand that to accept this new arrangement is to survive.”

“Hmm.” Tate looked unconvinced. “The Shopkeeper. Not the man best known for liking change.”

18

Sam couldn’t stop shaking. Even though he’d managed to stagger back to the house and had had a bath and been given hot sweet tea, he trembled at his very core. Iron’s lawyer sat on the other side of the table, watching him and waiting patiently.

“I didn’t kill him.”

“I know, sir,” he said slowly. “You’ve seen the video and you’ve seen the instructions he left me. No one is going to accuse you of anything.”

Iron had planned it. There’d been a concealed camera in the forge from the first day he went there and the entirety of Iron’s bizarre suicide had been recorded. But none of it made sense and Sam was terrified the police would walk in any moment. It was just so unlikely, so silly, that he simply couldn’t believe anyone would accept that the owner of a global corporation and one of the richest men in the world would choose to walk onto a metal stake. Once it was obvious what Iron was doing, they’d certainly want to know why he hadn’t been able to let go of it. Sam wanted to know that himself.

“I mean…what the fuck?” he asked out loud.

“Mr Ferran, I can see you’re still in shock—”

“What did you just call me?”

“Mr Ferran. I went through this with you, sir. You’ve been designated the official heir of the previous Mr Ferran and exist legally as Mr Samuel Ferran, his sole benefactor.” When Sam continued to fail to reply, he added. “As his son would be.”

“He wasn’t my father.” Sam gripped the edge of the table, wondering when he was going to wake up. “My father lives in Australia and collects stamps. He’s living off a shitty pension.”

The lawyer sighed. “I think it’s best we resume this tomorrow, after you’ve had time to rest. It seems the previous Mr Ferran didn’t appreciate how traumatic his actions would be.”

The noise of a helicopter landing on the grass outside made Sam look out of the window, his chest tight at the thought of the police flying in to arrest him.

“Ah, she’s here, good.” The lawyer stood up. “I’m sure Lady Nickel will want to speak to you in private. I’ll tell her where you are.”

“Next you’ll be telling me Lord Copper will be turning up and we’ll have a big old party.” A pathetic half-laugh slipped from his lips. “Maybe Lady Gold will be there.”

“I understand that Lord Copper hasn’t yet been informed of your new status,” the lawyer replied. “And the current incumbent is *Lord* Gold. You’ll be meeting them all soon. And please, don’t worry about Lady Nickel’s arrival. It was all part of the instructions left behind.”

“Oh, good,” Sam said flatly. “That makes me feel so much better.”

The lawyer smiled as if he’d never heard a man be sarcastic and left the room. Moments later Sam watched him leave the house and walk to the edge of the lawn as the helicopter’s door opened.

The woman who climbed out exuded power and confidence. She was wearing a trouser suit in a style more casual than Lord Iron’s used to be, but it looked just as crisp and just as expensive. Her hair was black with some grey at the temples and cut in a short afro, her brown eyes made striking by her bold makeup. She pulled out a briefcase, spoke to someone still inside the helicopter and then strode over to the lawyer. They shook hands and

when he spoke she looked at Sam through the window. They talked for less than a minute and then she was escorted in as two small suitcases were unloaded from the helicopter. It was taking off by the time she entered the room.

Sam stopped shaking. She walked in, set her briefcase down and looked at him. “So you’re the one,” she said, looking him up and down. “You’re not what I expected, but I suppose that’s the point.”

He stood up, wondering if he’d met her before, seen her on television perhaps, or in a newspaper. “I’m Sam,” he said.

She came over and they shook hands. Sam felt reassured she’d know what was going on and that, if things weren’t OK, she would fix them. There was such self-confidence, such an aura of authority that he felt safe for the first time since Iron’s death. Perhaps since Leanne’s too.

“My name is Mazzi, but your predecessor used to call me Nicky.”

“So you’ve got lots of names too?”

She nodded. “All of us do,” she said, pulling out the chair next to his and sitting down.

“Which one would you prefer me to call you?”

“I think Mazzi for now. Let’s keep it away from the Court for as long as we can. That’s best, I think, by the look of you.” She reached across and patted his hand. Her nails were painted a dark red. “It’s all going to be fine.”

“That’s such a lie,” Sam said, but he still felt better.

“So, what did he tell you?”

“Nothing.”

“Not even about the Elemental Court?”

Sam shook his head. “No, but I’ve heard other people mention it. What is it anyway?”

Mazzi pursed her lips and looked out of the window. “He asked me to help, but I didn’t realise I’d be babysitting. No offence.”

“Look, I’ll be OK. I’ll just…go back to Bath and try and get a job. Stuff will work out. He was obviously mental. No need for him to screw up my life any more.”

Mazzi stared at him as if he’d said something utterly ridiculous. “Oh, God. He really didn’t tell you anything. There’s no easy way to tell you this…you’re Lord Iron now.”

“That lawyer was saying some bollocks about me being the heir but I thought he was…” Sam stopped. “Oh fuck. This isn’t…I mean…this is something more than just some loony leaving me money, isn’t it?”

“You don’t seem like you have a head for business,” she said, stroking her chin with one of the shiny red nails. “Are you an artist? An engineer?”

“I’m a computer programmer. What’s that got to do with anything?”

“No natural affinity for iron in any way?”

“Oh. Seems I’m a good blacksmith. And there was this weird thing that happened in a park when my friend was attacked and oh, shit—you’re not like the Fae, are you?”

“Absolutely not.” Mazzi grinned. “You could say we’re the opposite. Especially you.”

“Me?”

“Yes, because you’re Lord Iron now. Come on, Sam, keep up. What was the weird thing that happened in the park?”

He told her about when Thorn attacked Cathy and the child in the park, how the railings had broken beneath him, how he’d been able to throw one like a spear so accurately. He shook as he described the iron plugs that had formed in his wounds and how he’d never found the right moment to confront Lord Iron about it before he died.

Mazzi was nodding, looking like she'd heard it all before. "You're definitely attuned. That probably caught his attention. You're a complete unknown to any of us—that's unusual but it makes more sense now."

"Are you saying I did that? I made the railings change?"

She shrugged. "We all have different ideas about how it works in the Court. Honestly, you have to make your own mind up about how you want to explain it, but it sounds like you manipulated the metal. I know blood is important for iron."

Sam thought of Leanne and Neugent and the apartment they'd given her to live in. He remembered that night in Bath, held stretched between the Brothers Thorn, and how his wedding ring had burned Thorn's skin. They would have killed him, and Cathy would have been killed if he hadn't intervened.

"Iron hurts the Fae," he whispered, looking at his wedding ring. He could feel its iron core in a way he couldn't before. It wasn't the ring Leanne had made for him; it was too perfect. The ring she'd died wearing wasn't made by him either. Neugent must have had them swapped.

"Yes, and when it's pure, it breaks their magic."

Sam realised the ring's core alone wasn't pure enough to protect him from the Charm Thorn's faerie placed on him, nor to stop Lord Poppy's interference.

"Copper makes them inert," Mazzi added.

Sam remembered the gloves Max put on, the night of the party in Aquae Sulis, before going through to take Lady Rose into custody. "I've seen an Arbiter wear gloves covered in copper."

Mazzi nodded. "It's been used by Arbiters for over a thousand years to imprison the Fae. The very anchors that hold the Worlds apart are made by

iron and copper. You'll never be at risk from them—they'll be terrified of you."

"Even if I'm not wearing pure iron?"

Mazzi smiled. "Sam, you *are* pure iron now, in the way that matters to their magic."

Sam was relieved he hadn't turned into metal. He didn't fully understand what she was saying, but it felt right. Did that mean Poppy would have to destroy the contract between them? He liked the thought of that.

"And I'll be able to protect other people from the Fae?"

"Yes."

He stared at the wedding band. "But it didn't protect my wife."

"Amir told me about her. He was trying to find a successor for decades but he corrupted all of them. Neugent was the last. That's why he did this, Sam. I know it's a shock but he did the best he could. The best for everyone."

"Was Amir his real name?"

She nodded. "We have the name we were born with, the name passed to us by our predecessor—but only the most powerful of us have that—and the name of our position in the Elemental Court."

"And what exactly are the people in the Court?"

She leaned back and looked out the window again. "We are the ones who have the closest affinity with one of the elements. It usually manifests in three different ways, and this is how we find potential successors: an aptitude for getting the most of that element out of the ground and in use, an aptitude for engineering or science that increases its use, or artistic ability. You'll become more attuned as you settle into it. You develop instincts…desires…ambitions. It's different for each of us."

“What about the Sorcerers? It sounds like the kind of thing that would freak them out.”

“They’re so out of touch they have no idea what we really get up to. They know there’s something deeper to it, but they seem to think of us like a guild of master craftsmen. They’ll make requests for pieces from you, by the way. They know it’s the purest iron they can get, and that’s used in their artefacts. They don’t ask very often. They know very little about what it’s really like to be in the Court, to be one of us, and that suits us just fine. We’ve never caused them any trouble, we help them keep the Fae in check and we’re polite. They’re the only people who could interfere, so the less they know, the better.” She frowned at him. “How come you know about the Fae and the Sorcerers and not us?”

Sam sighed. “I took a piss in the wrong place at the wrong time and got sucked into all their crap.” He didn’t want to raise the Poppy stuff. He didn’t want her to know how badly he’d screwed up.

“If you have any relationships with Sorcerers or Arbiters, keep it purely professional now.”

Sam nodded. “No worries there. So if it’s not what the Sorcerers think it is, what does the Elemental Court actually do?”

“Business. We make deals, we talk about what we’re up to and how we can help each other. It’s in a different place every year. Last year we met in Rio, the year before was Toronto. We’re due to meet in Manchester in six months’ time, but that’ll be brought forward when you’re announced. There’s a week’s grace, to give you a chance to get your head around it.”

“What if I don’t want to go?”

“Not an option. You’re one of the most powerful people in the world now. All of Amir’s estate, all of his companies, all of his power and influence is yours.”

“But that’s mental,” Sam whispered. “He was mental. He must have been.”

Mazzi held up a hand. “I won’t have you say that about him. He was a brilliant man. Just because this is all new to you doesn’t mean it wasn’t planned carefully. You need to decide what you’re going to do with what you’ve been given, and you need to decide fast. When the rest of the Court find out he’s passed on the mantle, they’ll want to meet you and they’ll want to know how things are going to change. They always do when there’s a new member.”

Sam rubbed his wrist, remembering the feel of Iron’s blood dripping from the gloves. He’d wanted to persuade him to change and it had seemed so hopeless. Now he was being told he was in charge of the very companies Leanne had sought to expose. A pulse of elation rippled through him. He could actually do something about it.

“I know exactly what I’m going to do with his business,” he said. “I’m going to shut it all down.”

Mazzi shook her head. “You can’t do that, not for at least ten years—it’s built into the rule of succession. If we let every new member make changes as drastic as that, the world would be in chaos.”

“But I own it all now, that’s what you said.”

“There’s a small army of people waiting to speak to you. They’ll explain it all,” Mazzi said. “Don’t worry. It will get easier.”

Sam nodded, not really listening to her properly. If he couldn’t close the corporation down he could still change it. And he could protect people from the Fae too. There was one right at the top of the list, the one they’d treated as badly as him. He would give Cathy the freedom she’d always wanted.

Margritte tossed the letter onto her desk and walked away from it, cursing the Peonias. She went to the window and looked down on Turl Street, wondering how busy its anchor was in Mundanus. She wanted distraction, she wanted people to watch to rid her of her tense loneliness, not the silent streets of Oxenford. Only twice had she seen anyone walk past; there were few parties in these troubled times.

She went back to the letter and scanned it for any hidden messages or even a subtext from which she could squeeze some hope, but there seemed to be nothing.

> *William Iris may be young and may have achieved the throne in unfortunate circumstances but he's already proving himself to be an admirable Duke.*

She read the line twice. Was it supposed to be an insult? Was she supposed to infer that opposing his reign was the wrong thing to do?

> *…and that is why we've decided to remain in Londinium rather than suffer the upheaval of moving to a new city.*

It was the fifth letter that week and it was clear no one was going to make the move to Oxenford. Georgiana was the only one who seemed genuinely upset at the prospect of staying in Londinium, though that was probably because Freddy had yet again ruined her chances to do anything exciting. Her letter had explained what William Iris had been doing to win the fickle Court over and Margritte was sickened by tales of his success. It seemed friendships spanning hundreds of years meant nothing; all forgotten when a handsome boy tackled a few robbers. How in the Worlds could he have managed to track down their stolen jewellery and return it? He was getting help from someone other than his patron to achieve that; Lord Tulip

had secured a promise from the Prince that Iris would be prevented from helping him directly again.

Margritte scrunched up the letter and threw it into the fire. As she watched the edges char and then catch alight she wondered if she was wrong to want to pursue her revenge. Her son didn't want to be Duke, her friends—or at least those she thought were friends—seemed all too happy to be charmed by the boy, and Rupert was so busy planning his own revenge she hadn't heard from him in over a week. Not that she wanted to see him.

She wanted to see Bartholomew. She wanted to hear his voice and smell his skin and feel his hand cup her cheek. She looked up at the painting over the fire, hidden beneath a veil of black silk so only his painted shoes could be seen. She sobbed every time she saw his face and so she'd covered it up and tried to get on with things. She'd been working hard trying to rejuvenate old alliances in Oxenford to gain support but her relationship with the people there needed to evolve. They had to think of her in some way other than as the grieving widow or she would be marginalised and—

She sagged. What did it matter? What was the point of keeping herself in social circles when she had no desire to socialise? She could go to her sister in Jutland and disappear from Albion's memory. She could appeal to her parents and ask them to give her something to do for the family, something that wasn't riddled with anger and hatred. She could do many things, but none of them appealed. A new life in Jutland would be *without* him, a new task for the family would be done *without* him. Everything was defined by his absence. Even herself.

Margritte shook her head. She couldn't just run away or ask someone else to keep her busy—she already had a clear idea of what she ultimately wanted to achieve and losing Bartholomew didn't mean that she should let

go of everything in her grief. There was the monthly group at Mr B's to consider and she still hadn't been able to track Miss Rainer down. She'd hoped that once she was Duchess she'd have new resources with which to search for her, another thing William Iris had denied her.

But the thought of fighting for women's rights alone was something she'd never had to face. Once she'd realised Bartholomew felt the same way they'd planned everything together, discussed it and steadily increased their influence in the hope that one day they'd have the opportunity to really make a difference. When the chance of the Dukedom presented itself they'd spent hours talking excitedly about what they could do. Now she was alone and without any power of her own. What could she achieve now? She'd already lost Charlotte and Rainer, now Bartholomew and so many others. She missed them all so much she could feel it in her chest like a heavy block of granite where her heart used to be.

A loud knock startled her and she realised how maudlin she'd become. She took a deep breath and called, "Come in" as cheerfully as she could.

Rupert walked in, dressed just as untidily as usual, this time with stubble. He looked like he hadn't groomed himself since the last time she saw him.

"Maggie!" he cheered. "You're not doing anything, are you?"

"Well, I—"

"Good." He held out a hand. She didn't want to take it, not being certain it had been washed recently, but it was too rude to ignore. "Come with me."

"Where are we going?"

"My place. Don't worry, it's safe. I want you to see something." She placed her hand in his and he clasped it tight. "You look like you need some fun. There's nothing more fun than killing a traitorous fuckpig Sorcerer, I reckon."

“You really want me to come and witness you killing another Sorcerer?”

“It’ll be brilliant. Really. I’ve got popcorn. And afterwards we can get ice cream from G&D’s, you know, that place opposite Somerville, and then destroy William Iris. Sound like a plan?”

Margritte nodded, chilled by how casually he spoke his intentions but not wanting to alienate the only person she knew who could get past Lord Iris’ protection Charms. But then she could hardly judge, considering what she wanted to do. “It’s certainly more appealing than what I had in mind.”

He pulled the silver yo-yo from his pocket and winked at her before aiming it at the wall. It felt strange to hold a man’s hand again and she wished it wasn’t his. A Way opened and he pulled her through as if he were a child running towards a table laden with cakes. She’d hoped the recent silence had been an indication that he’d lost interest in having her as an audience but nothing seemed to have changed in that regard.

The Way led straight into his office in the Stacks and she was relieved it wasn’t Convocation House. Some of the equipment from the den had been moved there including the computer and a projector screen. He finally let go of her hand as the Way closed behind them. One of the metal men was in the corner but she didn’t know if it was Benson or Hedges.

“Before you start, Rupert, may I ask you a question?”

“Yup.” He grabbed a large glass bowl filled with popped corn, something she remembered tasting on a trip to the Colonies across the Atlantic. He stuffed a handful in his mouth before holding the bowl towards her. She declined.

“Whilst I’m flattered to be asked, I must confess I’m not sure why you wish me to see any more of your sorcerous…business. When I came here before, it was in the most extraordinary circumstances, however this time you elected to bring me here. Is there something you need me to do?”

“Well,” he began, speaking around a mouthful of popcorn, “I was talking to one of the people in the psychology department a couple of days ago about grief and trauma and that kind of stuff. From what she was saying, I started to worry that you might not be sleeping, or that you had what they call flashbacks—intense memories that can be triggered after a traumatic event. We did nearly die, after all.”

She shook her head. “I haven’t had any.” At least, she hadn’t had any about the events in Convocation House. She’d seen Bartholomew run through a thousand times since that awful day. “It was distressing but we recovered.”

“Oh. Right. Cos I thought if you saw me hand Ekstrand his arse, it might be a good kind of closure for you.”

“I see. I don’t feel I have any need of it.” His hand, full of another load of popcorn, stopped halfway to his mouth. “But if you feel I should be here…”

“I want you to be here,” he said, more calmly than usual. “I like you. I shouldn’t, but I do.”

Margritte tensed and silently berated herself for accepting his invitation so readily. “But I’m in mourning.”

“That doesn’t stop me liking you. It stops you liking me back, I know that—I’m not a complete twat. I’m just…trying to be more honest and open. Like the Yanks.”

“The who?”

“The…colonials, I think your lot calls them. The Americans. You ever met one? They’re so fucking open. Probably because they didn’t live through Victoria’s reign. I don’t know what their Fae-touched are like, but the mundanes are fantastic. There are loads at the university.” He shrugged, her silence wearing his words down. “We hang out. Sometimes.”

Margritte had no idea why he'd taken such a liking to her but it made everything far more complicated than it needed to be. She didn't want to manipulate him like one of the Rosas would without a thought, but she didn't want to lose him as an ally. Could he detach his strange affection from the way they could work together to achieve their own goals? Either way, she had to be truthful and she had to try and keep him focused on what was important.

"I'm sorry, Rupert, I just can't think about anything like that at the moment."

"Shit, yes! I know, it's cool, I…Let's just kill Ekstrand, shall we?"

To her immense relief he set down the popcorn bowl and activated the screen. After a moment the white screen changed and displayed a map of a city. Once she saw a couple of the street names she realised it was Bath.

"The thing about Sorcerers is that they're bloody hard to find, especially when you want to kill one." Rupert pressed another button and the map was overlaid with dozens of red dots. "I've always known he was somewhere in Bath, just from the way he talked about the place, but I had no idea where. I sent some of the Proctors to release some of my gadgets down there to see if they could find anything that might be an anchor. I found something much better instead."

"What are the dots?"

"Sensors, ones that Ekstrand has placed all over the city to monitor the Fae-touched there. See, this is what happens when you have a Sorcerer who doesn't have a fucking clue what's going on because he doesn't work *with* you people. I realised—hundreds of years ago—that you weren't the enemy. The Fae are the ones who cause all the problems, you guys just get roped into doing stuff for them. You can't turn around and say bugger off to the Fae so you're just as much victims as the mundanes are."

Margritte just nodded, keeping quiet. She'd wondered why Oxenford was run so cooperatively.

"I figured that if we worked together the innocents would be more likely to stay that way. But Ekstrand is a paranoid little shit and has set up this network all over Bath so he can track the residents of Aquae Sulis going in and out of the Nether."

Margritte didn't have to fake her surprise. "And they have no idea?"

"Nope. It's probably why his Arbiters are so low profile," Rupert said. "Now, my boys did a bit of work on these things and they're all wired—he's so nineteenth-century!—to send the data back to this location." He tapped another key and all the dots disappeared, leaving one large house highlighted on the outskirts of the city.

"Is that where he lives?" she asked and he nodded, his eyes bright with excitement. "What are you going to do?"

"Watch and see."

The image changed from a map to that of a house in Mundanus. It was a beautiful property with a fountain in the centre of the drive and stone pillars either side of the door. A bird flew out of a tree and she realised they were somehow watching what was probably the anchor property of the Sorcerer's home. Margritte clasped her hands together in an effort to keep her nerves under control. She didn't want to watch a man being murdered, even if he had tried to kill Rupert—and her, albeit inadvertently. Rupert was acting as if he was about to show her a music-hall performance he'd enjoyed, rather than an act of violence, and it made her feel unsafe. If he succeeded, he would be the only Sorcerer in Albion. What would that mean for the other Nether cities?

"Fly, my pretties," Rupert whispered, and Margritte saw a dark cloud appear in the top left corner of the image, which headed straight for the

house.

“Are those insects?”

“Really fucking amazing nanotech insects made of a completely new material he can’t have possibly warded against.”

“Are they going to sting him to death?”

Rupert laughed. “No, they’re going to give me control of the anchors in his property. Once I have that…” He focused on the screen, forgetting to finish the sentence.

The swarm landed on the house, giving it the appearance of being smudged with charcoal, then coalesced in certain places until it looked like the house had been splattered with huge ink blots.

“Go on, go on!” Rupert sounded like a man watching a cricket match.

A couple of minutes crept by and Margritte wanted to go home. She wasn’t interested in facilitating his fantasies; she didn’t want to be there just to smile at him when it was over and congratulate him on winning this lethal game. That’s all it was; even though he was a Sorcerer, he was still a typical man wanting the approval and adoration of someone he liked but considered beneath him. He didn’t realise she was only there because she hoped he’d help her deal with William Iris. But now, watching his attempt to kill another man, she was losing the desire to make the boy suffer. She just wanted him to clear Bartholomew’s name. She didn’t want to get sucked any further into this downward spiral of hatred and bitterness. She didn’t want to be like Rupert.

“What the fuck…come on!” Rupert glanced at a wristwatch and then back at the screen. “Why’s it taking so fucking long?” He jabbed at the computer keyboard and the image switched to the back of the property with a different distribution of ink blots.

The back door opened and a man dressed as a butler stepped out, holding out a hand to test the weather. Margritte sucked in a breath, fearful that the poor man—only a servant—was about to be bitten to death. But he simply went back into the house and emerged moments later wearing an overcoat.

“Rupert…” she whispered. “Don’t hurt that man.”

He didn’t reply. They both watched the butler walk a few steps and glance back at the house as he probably did every time he left it. He stopped and wheeled around, his back to them as he scanned the house and its infestation. Calmly, but with more speed than when he’d left, the man went back inside the house.

“Shit,” Rupert said, scratching the stubble on his neck. “They’d better break through soon or—”

“You have to call them off,” Margritte said. “That man’s in there now. If you do whatever it is you plan to, he’ll be killed as well.”

“All staff know the risks,” Rupert said, keeping his eyes on the screen. “I could have had staff in my place when he attacked—I had a guest! He almost killed you.”

“That doesn’t give you the right to murder a man who happens to work there.”

“A man who knows what Ekstrand is like and helps him to murder—”

“Don’t be so ridiculous.” Margritte went to him and touched his arm. “This is wrong, Rupert, you must see that.”

He looked down at her hand and stared at it until she started to pull it away. He pressed his own hand over it and held her there, now staring into her eyes. She saw that his were hazel, with flecks of brown around the iris, and her instinct was to get away before he tried to kiss her. As his eyes

started to close and his head leaned forwards she looked at the screen, desperate to see something that would distract him.

The door opened and the butler emerged, this time wearing an apron and long rubber gloves, holding something made of brass that looked like a cross between a plant sprayer and a rifle.

“Look!” she said, as grateful for the distraction as she was concerned for the butler.

Rupert let her go and clasped the sides of his head with his hands. “That can’t be—”

Margritte backed away, as slowly as she could, so as not to draw his attention. When she was out of his reach she watched the butler spraying at the clusters of insects. Whatever was in the device was cleaning the insects from the stone walls as easily as water washing chalk off a blackboard. Rupert made a series of agonised groans, transfixed by the sight of his failure. He hung his head when the last of the swarm was removed and didn’t look up again until the butler came back out of the house with a dustpan and brush and proceeded to sweep up the detritus left by Rupert’s failed assassination attempt.

“Fuck!” He yelled and slammed his fist onto the keyboard, making the image of the butler play backwards, before he threw an empty tea mug at the button at the corner of the screen and made it black again. He leaned against his desk, hunched over the computer, shaking his head and muttering to himself.

Margritte stayed still and silent, as did the golem.

Eventually Rupert straightened up and turned to her. “Well. That was fucking embarrassing.” He shoved his hands in his pockets. “That cock always was good at warding. Seems he actually deserves that reputation. I brought you here for nothing.”

She didn’t agree but she didn’t say so. “Perhaps you should open a Way for me. I think you need to be alone.”

He sighed. “I said I’d sort out William Iris after this. Ekstrand’s going to be a hard nut to smash into fucking smithereens but I don’t see why you should have to wait any longer.”

“I don’t want to kill William,” she said hurriedly.

“Not right away, I understand that,” Rupert said, nodding. “You need him to clear Bartholomew’s name first. I just figure that if he’s tied to a chair, horribly sleep-deprived and scared out of his tiny mind, he’ll be more willing to do that for you.”

Margritte nodded. She didn’t want the boy to just carry on with his life with no punishment for his crime but after seeing Rupert’s behaviour she was feeling less certain of how to go about it. Asking nicely wouldn’t get what she needed, though. “He’ll be protected by his patron, I don’t see how I could get him to—”

Rupert held up a hand. “Don’t worry about that. All you need to do is get yourself alone in a room with him. Let me know the time and place and I’ll do the rest.”

“And what about the Irises that live here?”

“When we move against William we’ll take them into custody too, otherwise Iris will use them against us. I won’t hurt them—they’ve been good to the university for a long time. But you said it yourself—William Iris is working with Ekstrand to take over Albion. We can’t be too careful about the other Irises already here.”

“Are you sure you want to do this, Rupert? The university has already lost the Rosas.”

He shrugged. “Shit happens. I was thinking about giving you Magdalen when the Irises go down. If you want it.”

She would be the first woman to have a position of power in Oxenford. “Not Lincoln?”

“I want Alex to stay as Vice-Chancellor and you to have your own college.”

So that was it; he wanted her to give up on taking the throne back. “I’ll think about it.”

He opened a Way for her and she stepped through, greatly relieved to see him remain on the other side. “See you soon,” he said and gave a sad smile before it closed.

She let out a long breath and rang for tea. Getting William Iris to meet her seemed impossible; he would expect revenge or foul play. The rattle of a Letterboxer made her jump and she realised how tense the time with Rupert had made her. He was offering her the chance to show everyone that a woman could have responsibility outside the household. If she made a success of it, the cause could be reignited. But could she accept in the knowledge that Bartholomew’s dream would never be realised and there would never be a Tulipa on the Londinium throne?

Once the letterbox disappeared she picked up the letter and was surprised to see a fleur-de-lys on the wax seal. She opened it and looked at the end of the letter first: “Catherine Reticulata-Iris”, with no mention of her new title.

She wanted to meet. Margritte knew it was the opportunity she needed to get to Will. Just as she was about to pen a reply there was a knock at the door.

“Please don’t be Rupert,” she whispered and then invited the caller in after tucking Catherine’s letter into the top drawer of her bureau.

Georgiana Persificola-Viola swept into the room wearing an austere black dress and the first genuinely joyful smile Margritte had seen on her

face for many years.

“Georgiana?”

“Oh, Margritte,” she said, rushing to clasp her tight. “The most wonderful thing has happened. Freddy is dead!”

19

Max decided to put his efforts into learning more about the Agency whilst waiting for Ekstrand to have a good enough day to tell him where the tracker was located and thereby the location of Faulkner's Chapter. The gargoyle had managed to wait two days before convincing Petra to go into Ekstrand's study and take the reading herself. Max had been in the middle of the tour of the upper floors of the Agency Headquarters at the time, aware of what the gargoyle was doing but unable to stop it. By the time he'd got back the gargoyle had the location and Petra hadn't seemed concerned about their activities.

As Max followed Derne into another room lined with more filing cabinets, the gargoyle was posted in the Nether, watching the Chapter Master's movements. It was the third day of the gargoyle's surveillance and a pattern had already emerged. Max planned to make his move the next day.

Max located the right drawer and pulled the file from the cabinet as Derne watched in silence. Cathy had led him on an interesting paper trail and between them they were uncovering more dirty nooks in Fae-touched society than in an abandoned house. The latest was a secret asylum in Mundanus.

"This isn't a breach of the Treaty," Derne said as Max scanned the top page. "There's nothing to state that those who are no longer innocent cannot be returned to live out the rest of their days in Mundanus."

"Are you concerned about something, Mr Derne?" Max looked up from the page at him. "I never said anything about the Treaty, or any breaches."

Derne cleared his throat. “I find this rather difficult.”

“Yes, I suppose you would,” Max replied. “This asylum is staffed by your people?”

“Of course. No innocents are involved at all.”

“There’s no information about visiting hours.”

“Of course not. Nobody visits these people.”

“What if someone wanted to.”

“I find that highly unlikely.”

“I find it hard to believe that these people have no loved ones who worry about how they are.” Max flipped a page and saw the latest name Catherine was looking for in the list of patients. “Or do the loved ones have no idea where this place is either?”

Derne’s frown deepened. “The Patroons know where it is and whether they choose to share that information with the relevant parties is up to them. We merely provide a safe environment. Being alive for hundreds of years can take its toll. Some people simply cannot maintain the clarity of thought required to survive in Society and so it’s kinder to them to let them rest in a quiet, peaceful location.”

“Far away from the rest of Society,” Max said. “To die.”

“To age naturally,” Derne said.

Natural aging terrified the puppets and Max wasn’t under the impression they would voluntarily choose it over life in the Nether. The Chapter had speculated about the fate of various individuals who’d been picked up in Mundanus confused and terrified by how it had changed. Now he knew where they’d gone, but had no Chapter to report back to. “So you put them in Green Dale Asylum when you know they can’t be put to better use here?”

Derne merely smiled.

“The techniques you use on the ones in the basement don’t work on them, I assume, otherwise this asylum wouldn’t exist. And you don’t have any ethical concerns about the way you brainwash the people taken by the Collectors?”

“Should I?” Derne asked without any hint of remorse. “No one else has complained. We take great care and give a great deal of thought to where people are placed once they’ve come to terms with their change in status. Society requires a steady turnover of staff, Mr Arbiter. Better that we take them from within the Nether than from the streets of Mundanus. Surely you would agree with that?”

“But there are staff from Mundanus.”

“Only a handful and only taken in when a breach made it imperative. Never against their will, I can assure you.”

Max closed the file. “I’m taking this with me.”

Derne sighed. “Can I at least take a facsimile so that our records aren’t damaged any further?”

“I’ll return it soon,” Max said, not wanting to give them a chance to cut or change any of the information within. “I want to see your files on the children born into the Agency.”

Catherine had told him what her bodyguard had said and asked that it be looked into as well. The gargoyle had been dying to go and see her in person, no doubt to tell her how the Agency ran their premises, but Max had been deliberately keeping them apart. Max hadn’t anticipated children being involved with the Agency other than the ones who had the misfortune of being young when their family was cast out of Society, but that happened very rarely. No doubt there was a current glut of minors, since the Rosas had fallen from grace en masse, but Catherine had made it sound like they were born and raised there.

Derne hadn’t moved. “Could that be another time? I have a meeting.”

“Then get someone else to show me.”

With a grim expression Derne mumbled, “Follow me.”

The main reason Max hadn’t anticipated children was because of the strict segregation he’d observed in the upper floors of the building. The male and female staff-in-training slept in separate dormitories divided by a corridor policed by a guard. Considering that some of those people must have known each other in their previous lives Max could understand the caution.

Another room, again full of files. Max scanned the drawer labels, which contained date ranges instead of alphabetical ordering. “Where do you get the babies from, Mr Derne?”

“Hasn’t anyone explained to you how children are made?”

“I’m immune to sarcasm as well as Fae Charms,” he replied. “Let’s get to the point. You keep your employees separated. Everything is so tightly controlled here I can only assume these babies are planned.”

“They are.”

“So people in marriages before their change in status are allowed to continue to sire children?”

Derne looked away, scratching the bridge of his nose.

“You’ll get to your meeting much faster if you just lay it all on the table, Mr Derne. Surely you’ve realised by now that we’re going to learn everything about what you do here, whether it’s with your cooperation or not.”

Derne’s nostrils flared. “We match the parents to obtain the children most likely to have the qualities we require.” When Max remained silent he added, “Every new arrival is evaluated and allocated to the positions they would suit the most. You’ve seen the notes made using our annotations at

the front of each file. Those with a very specific cluster of skills and natural abilities are filtered into the programme you saw in the basement to maintain the building."

"You breed the kind of people you need and raise them to be servants," Max said.

"Yes," Derne replied, relaxing when he realised there was going to be no need to justify himself to an emotionless man. "It's most efficient."

"And the parents? Do they have any say?"

"No. And they're not involved in the lives of their children. It's less complicated that way." Derne sniffed and rolled onto his heels and then onto his toes. "Charms are used so it isn't traumatic for those involved. We're not barbarians."

Max wondered how Catherine would react when she heard about this. He knew the gargoyle would have a lot to say. It always did.

"How long have you been doing this?"

"Hundreds of years. The only people who've done it longer than us are the Fae themselves. But you must know all about that."

Max didn't say anything. He knew the puppets arranged their marriages but had always assumed it was just as it was for the innocents: for the mutual benefit of the families to increase their wealth and influence. That the Fae might be involved in pairing people off to have children suggested they planned ahead and that was not something that sat well with his idea of them. They were flighty and mercurial, obsessed with a person one minute only to abandon them in disgust the next. If they were selectively breeding it meant they were looking for a particular combination of features, like the Agency. Like dog and horse breeders. But what for?

"Thank you for your cooperation," Max said. It was time to go and meet Cathy.

Will read the letter a second time and leaned back in his chair. Amelia had been telling the truth. Even though he'd believed her at the time, there was still a doubt, still a fear she was saying whatever she needed to at the time to stay his hand. He would have a son within the year, just not the one Iris wanted. For the briefest moment he considered a ruse to pass off the child as Cathy's but immediately dismissed it. Lord Iris would be able to tell, surely? It was too much of a risk.

Amelia was tucked away in a mundane country house, under guard and stripped of all Charms and artefacts. His man's report said she was eating and sleeping well and wrote to Cornelius every day, handing the letters to the butler in the hope that she would gain permission to send them at some point soon. They were burned straightaway, in accordance with his instructions. She didn't know her brother was already dead.

"It's a merciful death," he'd said to Cornelius as he poured the hemlock into the glass. "The way Socrates died."

"It's *bloodless*, not merciful," Cornelius said. "You prefer to kill me like a woman would. It seems you've lost your taste for swords."

"No," Will said. "I just want you to die slowly."

Cornelius didn't beg for his life but just picked up the cup and drank it swiftly. "You can go now," he said with stained lips but Will shook his head.

It was a long time to sit in a room with a dying man but Will had to see it done, had to be certain he really was dead. Near the end Cornelius said Amelia would never forgive him for killing her brother and Will had simply smiled. "I will never forgive her either."

He took the report on Amelia to the fire and threw it into the flames. He wanted the child to be brought to him immediately but what would he tell Cathy? There had been illegitimate children in both Mundanus and the

Nether for as long as there had been marriage. Other families took the children in, even though they could never reach the higher echelons of Society, but he knew that was an impossibility in his own. His patron would not approve and his firstborn son would have the dubious status Sophia endured: an open secret within the household, yet hidden from the Patroon and without recognition in Society. No doubt Cathy suspected Amelia was his mistress before the revelations about their treachery, but bringing physical proof of it into her home would be so hurtful. He only wanted her to be happy.

A footman brought him a note on a silver tray. It had been delivered by a messenger who was waiting for a reply. Will recognised Faulkner's handwriting and opened it.

> *Frederick Persificola-Viola was found dead in a mundane massage parlour in Soho in the small hours of this morning. He appears to have suffered a heart attack and the mundane emergency services were unable to resuscitate him. I found traces of Charms suggesting foul play. In light of our previous conversation regarding this individual, would you like me to pursue?*

"Tell the messenger the answer is no. No further attention required."

"Yes, your Grace," the young man replied and left after a swift bow.

Will threw that note on the fire too. Bertrand had picked an excellent location; the family would be keen to keep the circumstances of the death as quiet as possible and it was in keeping with Freddy's unsavoury habits. It was the third death he felt responsible for, even though he hadn't committed the murder itself. Would there be more? The first was the only one he truly

regretted, the second was unpleasant but justified and the third was… business. Was that reason enough?

He closed his eyes and rested his arm on the mantelpiece, thinking about what Tate said about his family. He wondered whether his father had done anything like he had to protect their influence in Aquae Sulis. He would never know; it was hardly the sort of thing his father would elect to tell him and he could never ask. But even though Will felt heavy and sickened by his own behaviour, he couldn't deny it was achieving the results he wanted. Londinium was falling into line after his success with the highwaymen problem, Bertrand would be a powerful ally and the Shopkeeper had barely reacted to his announcement that he would be supplying his products now—he hadn't given him any reason to worry. Once he and Derne were happy that Will's taking over wasn't going to affect the quality of the products he would start to turn the arrangement to his advantage.

Tired of politics and plans, Will felt no desire to go to Black's and be roped into a conversation about the city. Cathy was meeting Margritte, something he'd only agreed to in an effort to demonstrate he trusted her. Margritte was of no concern now that her efforts to disrupt his Court had failed but Cathy seemed to think it was important to at least try to open a dialogue.

He went to the nursery wing and knew it was the right thing to do as soon as he stepped through the door to Mundanus. Sophia's laughter was echoing down the corridor and sped his steps. She was in the schoolroom with Uncle Vincent, trying to catch bubbles he was blowing from a loop of plastic.

"Will-yum!" she cheered and raced to him with open arms. He did his best to ignore the scars that covered her throat.

He scooped her up and soon his face was covered in tiny kisses. His uncle smiled and set the bottle of bubble mixture down. “Hello, Sophia,” said Will.

“Cathy brought me some dollies, do you want to see them?”

“I would love to,” Will lied, and she ran from the room.

“She’s healed well,” Uncle Vincent said. “And she’s sleeping better too.”

“Good,” Will said. “Is she bothered by the scarring? I’ve got some plans for removing them.” He’d put in an order with Tate at the end of their meeting. She said it would take between three to six months to gather the ingredients but it was worth the wait.

“No, she doesn’t mention it.” Vincent pointed at the small bottle. “Catherine gave that to her. You should have seen her face when I blew the first bubble. She thought it was magic.”

Will smiled. “And Cathy bought her dolls too?”

“Mmm.” Vincent sat on the windowsill. “Catherine means well, I’m sure.”

“Look!” Sophia was back and thrust a doll towards Will. “This is Josephine. She has the same hair as me!” Will took it from her, surprised to see it dressed in safari gear with its own little pith helmet. “She’s an explorer. That’s why she’s wearing trousers, like a boy, so the creepy-crawlies don’t bite her legs and so she can climb trees to take pictures of elephants and dinosaurs.”

“Climb trees?” Will looked at Vincent who shrugged.

“Yes. Girls are allowed to climb trees, Cathy told me, but Uncle Vincent won’t let me.” She pouted in his direction.

“And what about the other dolls?”

He put the explorer down and Sophia pulled out the other two from under her arm. “This one is called Jessamine and she’s an ark…leegist. She finds old things and puts them in museums. That’s why she has a brush and book. The brush is for the dust on the treasure and the book is to write it all down. That’s very important.”

“Archaeologist,” Will said and Sophia nodded.

“That’s what I said. And this is Jemima.”

It was the only doll that looked like any his sister had owned. She was wearing a silk ballgown and tiny jewels. “Ah. Is she a princess?”

“Yes! She’s a princess who can fire laser beams from her eyes and fly and she can lift whole houses! She finds bad people and locks them in prison and everyone loves her because she’s good and strong.”

“I see…” Will didn’t know what to say. “And you thought this up all by yourself?”

“No, Cathy told me all about them. She said I could be anything I want to be, not just a princess. I said I want to be one and be pretty and she said it was better to be a princess who can fire laser beams! Anyone can wear a dress and look pretty but only super-duper girls like me can explore Africa and find treasure because I’m clever.”

“Has Auntie Cathy been playing with you then?”

“Yes and I love her and I don’t want to go home, Will-yum. It’s boring there and no one plays with me. I can write my name and read books too, shall I show you?”

“Yes, but put the dolls away first, darling.”

When she ran out he looked at Vincent. “Cathy’s been busy.”

“So it seems. I talked to her about those dolls and she said Sophia needs to aspire to more than getting married.”

Will folded his arms, irritated that Cathy was imposing her own views on Sophia.

“I think she’s right, Will. We both know that Sophia can’t be married off like Imogen will be. I’m not even sure she can have a life in the Nether.”

“What have Mother and Father said?”

“Nothing. I don’t think they want to deal with the problem. She can’t be hidden away for ever.”

“They haven’t even visited her.” Will hadn’t bothered them for fear a reminder would prompt them to take her back. Now he wondered if they wanted her back at all. He’d expected them to insist on taking her home after the attack and he’d dreaded the accusation that he was incapable of providing a safe environment for her, but there had been nothing of the sort.

“Well…they know I’m here and I keep your mother informed.” Vincent looked out of the window at the rain. “But I think they don’t know what to do either. The family is more high-profile than most. I have the feeling they’ll ship her off somewhere eventually.”

“They will not,” Will said. “She has a home here and I’ll inform Mother she can stay indefinitely.”

“You’re even more in the public eye, Will. It’s a risk.”

“Hang the risk. Besides, I think it does Cathy good to have her here.” He looked at the bottle of bubble mixture. Whilst he wasn’t sure about the strange dolls, he was touched by how she’d clearly been spending time with Sophia when he hadn’t had a chance to do so. She was thoughtful, in her own way. “I just want her to feel safe and be happy,” he added.

“Sophia or Catherine?”

Will smiled. “Both.”

20

Margritte didn’t want to go back to Hampton Court ever again but there seemed to be no other locations suitable for meeting Catherine. As Duchess it was unreasonable for her to be expected to leave Londinium and they needed a private place to keep the gossips at bay. She didn’t expect any threat to her personal safety but she still wanted to feel secure.

She picked a room they seldom used when Bartholomew was alive and went in through the servants’ entrance for fear of triggering memories that would leave her incapable of keeping a clear head. There was only a skeletal staff in residence and the palace felt horribly empty but she managed to keep her composure whilst waiting for Catherine to arrive. She had to keep her mind focused on what she wanted: a meeting with William in person, away from the Court.

The sound of a carriage on the driveway brought back memories of waiting for dinner-party guests to arrive. She looked down at her black dress, trying to remind herself that it was different now and there was no need to keep thinking of the past. Instead she tried to work out why Catherine had requested a meeting. Was it a strange sense of guilt for being the cause of William’s actions without being responsible for them? Was it simple concern for someone who was becoming a friend before everything went so horribly wrong? There was the possibility that William had sent her to determine whether she intended to cause any more trouble. No doubt he knew of her attempt to lure residents away by now; Georgiana had told her that those she’d written to were the first to receive their stolen goods back.

“Her Grace, the Duchess of Londinium, Catherine Reticulata-Iris,” announced the footman and Margritte readied herself, still uncertain how to play it when Catherine entered.

She looked well and was dressed in a deep burgundy dress with a high collar and the narrow line of the late Victorian period. She also looked as nervous as a debutante at her first ball.

“Your Grace,” Margritte said and curtsied deeply, as Georgiana had to her that night she’d briefly been Duchess.

“Margritte, thank you so much for agreeing to see me.”

“Would you care to sit down?”

Catherine did so and Margritte gave the nod for tea to be brought. She hadn’t entertained formally since the bereavement and she was a little uncomfortable. It felt too soon, and therefore disrespectful.

“How are you finding your new role?” she asked and Catherine squirmed.

“Umm…oh, God, this is awkward.”

Margritte almost smiled. She’d forgotten how open the girl was.

“I asked to see you because we need to talk,” Catherine said, her words slow and carefully chosen. “But before I get to that, I wanted to say how sorry I am about…what happened. It was such a shock.” She grimaced. “It must have been so much worse for you, I don’t want to sound like…oh, for the love of…”

“I understand, and thank you.” Margritte wanted to make her feel more comfortable. She wanted her to let down the flimsy guard.

“Are you…coping? That didn’t come out right. I mean, are you all right? No, of course you’re not all right, I mean…” She released a long breath. “I’m so sorry, I’m making a complete mess of this.”

“Bereavement is difficult for everyone,” Margritte said. “One never knows what to say.”

“Exactly!” Catherine smiled. “It’s just that Bartholomew was such a wonderful man and you were both so very kind to me and I…”

Margritte clenched her teeth at the sound of his name. And she was right; they had been so kind to her—and William—yet it had meant nothing. She used the arrival of the tea to mask her anger.

Catherine fell silent as she watched it being poured. “Have you been here the whole time?”

“No, I’ve been spending some time with my eldest son in Oxenford.”

Cathy knew of the reflected city but had never been there. She said as much, adding, “Is it nice?”

“It’s a beautiful city.” She handed over the cup of tea. “Now, you said there was something you wanted to tell me. Is it about who attacked you?”

Catherine’s cup rattled in the saucer and she set it on her lap so quickly that some of the tea slopped over. “No.”

“Have you fully recovered?”

“Almost.”

“I understand you were very badly hurt. Did your husband catch the perpetrator?”

Catherine just stared at her, a terrible flush rising up her face from her throat. How, Margritte wondered, could this girl be a Duchess?

“It’s all…in the past now. All of it.”

“But it’s left scars. On both of us.”

“Will didn’t—” She looked down at the spilt tea. “Please, I don’t want to talk about it.”

Margritte watched Catherine attempt to compose herself. It was clear she was hiding something, but what? Did she know who had really sent an

assassin? Or perhaps she'd discovered the man behind the attempt was her husband, or even the Sorcerer of Wessex, creating the perfect excuse to attack Bartholomew. She decided to let it go until the girl had settled down.

"I…wanted to see you to talk about the group that meets at Mr B's."

It was the last thing Margritte expected her to say. "I beg your pardon?"

"The one started by Miss Rainer. She was my governess and I found her again and she managed to tell me about the group. And I know you and Bartholomew were members."

Margritte set her cup down with a loud chink. "Where is she? We looked everywhere!"

"She's in a household near Kew Gardens. She's a scullery maid. The Agency did something terrible to her. And Charlotte too—I think that was her husband. I'm tracking down where they took the others, the ones who dared to speak out."

"You're…you're one of us?"

Catherine's face transformed with the most beautiful smile. "Yes! And it's just eating me up that you and Bartholomew would have been perfect to change everything—that's what you were going to do, wasn't it?"

Margritte nodded, struggling to adapt to the new course the conversation was taking. "Is William a progressive?"

"Not yet. But I think he will be. He's gentle and thoughtful and—" She stopped and the usual awkwardness resurfaced. "You must think he's a monster but he really isn't. He wouldn't have done that if…he wouldn't have normally…"

Catherine's eyes were filled with the need to tell the truth. "Your Grace, everyone believes that my husband sent another to kill you. They think he's a base creature who obtained the throne by attacking his competitor's wife. Do you realise how hard that is to live with?" Catherine nodded silently.

“You know it couldn’t possibly have been Bartholomew. You spent hours talking to him, you know he was a good man, now you know just how remarkable he was. Surely William must be told to look elsewhere for the villain behind this terrible affair?”

“It’s…complicated.”

“Is it? It seems very simple to me. Bartholomew’s name must be cleared. We’ve lost everything, and the least William can do is restore his honour.”

Catherine was blinking rapidly, unable to look her in the eye. “I don’t think I can speak for Will. I wanted to ask you if you’d help me with the cause. If we worked together…”

Margritte stiffened. “You want me to be your adviser in Londinium when I cannot even show my face in the Court?”

“What I’m trying to say is that we need to try and salvage what we can.”

“I’m trying to salvage my entire life! You come here, wife of the man who murdered my husband, to talk about changing Society for the good of women and you can’t even offer me the most basic reassurance that my family’s name will be cleared?”

Catherine was shaking. “I can understand how angry you are. I shouldn’t have…I should have given you more time. It was selfish of me to think you’d be able to help, I’m sorry.”

Margritte forced herself to calm down. She’d pushed Catherine too far. “I’m sorry too. It wasn’t your fault. And I’m truly…heartened that you see the need for change in Society. But it will come to nothing unless William can be brought onside. The Patroons will dismiss anything we do, but they won’t be able to ignore the Duke of Londinium.”

Catherine nodded, crushed. “You’re right. But it’s not going to stop me trying. The men and women who’ve been silenced need my help and it will carry on happening if we don’t actively strive for change. I’m not asking you to forget your husband—nor what Will did—and I’m not asking you to come back to the Court and act as if nothing happened. But is there nothing I can do to convince you to help our cause? This is a difficult time for Will but I’m certain he’ll come round. The more I can achieve before then, the better, and you’re the perfect person to help.”

Margritte felt the briefest sadness at Catherine’s earnest plea. If she abandoned her need for justice and took up the position in Oxenford she would be free to help her and the others in the secret group. She knew it was the noble thing to do. But, as she took a breath to agree, the thought of William Iris keeping the throne made it catch in her throat. Of course he would never clear Bartholomew’s name; he didn’t want to risk his own reputation. He would live a long, long life and because of his barbarity she was forced to live without the man she loved. She had to at least try to restore her husband’s honour, otherwise she would never forgive herself. “How can I help when all I can think about is the injustice committed against my husband?”

“But…surely you see how hard it would be for Will to say anything about what happened?”

Margritte nodded, seeing the way to get what she wanted opening up before her. “I do. He needs to preserve his own reputation, I understand that. But if he truly is the gentle man you believe him to be, surely he feels some remorse?”

“Oh, he does!” Catherine seemed convinced at least.

“Then would it be possible to ask him to express that remorse to me—in private—and offer his personal regret? If he could do that, my heart would

be eased and the Duke of Londinium would no longer be monstrous to me."

"I…"

"It would also offer proof that he could indeed be persuaded to support our struggle. I would have hope for the future once more."

Catherine stood. "I'll ask him. I'll do all I can to try and change things for the better, for you and for all of us."

Margritte kissed her on both cheeks, stifling the guilt rising in her chest. "Thank you, your Grace. We must all do what we feel is right."

Ten minutes into the meeting and Sam was still there at the head of the table. No one had told him it was all an elaborate hoax. He'd been waiting for someone to tell him that for the last twenty-four hours, but it seemed he really was Lord Iron.

The problem lay in the fact that even though the suited lawyers, accountants and directors seated at the table treated him like their new billionaire boss, he still felt like an unemployed computer programmer from Bath. Now he truly understood those people who looked shell-shocked after a massive lottery win and why they said their lives wouldn't be changed. It was simply impossible to grasp how different everything could be, so they clung to their old life out of terror, like it had been taken out of a bathtub and chucked into an ocean.

All of the things he used to worry about, from paying the bills to whether he could really justify getting a new games console, had been replaced by a whole set of new worries that he simply didn't understand yet. The men and women seated around the table were showing him spreadsheets and pie charts and projections and statements as if they could mean something to him.

"…and if you continue with this program of expansion in this—"

Sam held up a hand and Susan, the woman giving the presentation, stopped speaking. "I'm sorry, I'd prefer it if you just left the materials with me to look at in my own time."

"Of course, Mr Ferran."

"And I want to use this time to ask a few questions."

Pens were picked up, some activated tablets and laptops, all poised to take notes.

"All right…governments and international agencies have different laws about preventing environmental pollution. Some have laws that need clean-air tech installed as standard, for example. Am I right?"

Susan nodded. She had brown hair and hazel eyes and looked like an English teacher he'd had at secondary school, but dressed in a much more expensive suit. "That's right, Mr Ferran. There are also differences in the amount of monitoring and the pressure to prove compliance."

"Good." Sam smiled at her, glad to have someone to focus on instead of the whole group. "So would it be possible for someone to write me a report…" He faltered. Did he really just ask that? "…on what the most stringent requirements are and how many of the mines and factories and things in the corporation adhere to them?"

Susan frowned. "Do you mean a report on which operations meet local compliance? If that's the case there's no need—all of our operations comply with local environmental code."

"No, I mean, which ones comply with the strictest codes in the world. Not local ones. I want to know exactly what the most strict environmental protection measures are and I want all of the global operations to be measured against that standard. Does that make sense?"

The scrawling and touch-typing stopped before his last sentence did.

“It shouldn’t be too hard, should it?” Sam asked.

“It will take some time to compile,” she said. “CoFerrum Inc owns hundreds of operations around the world.”

“But there must be a central database containing information about them. If there isn’t, I’ll build one.”

They all laughed, then realised he wasn’t joking. “There is,” she replied as people fiddled with their pens and gadgets, “but I don’t think it necessarily contains detailed information on that sort of thing.”

“Why not?”

“It’s never been a priority.”

“Why not?”

A man with a large nose who looked a little bit like an American bald eagle raised a finger to get his attention. “Mr Ferran, you’ve made an interesting request and I’m sure it isn’t just a matter of curiosity. What do you plan to do with the report once it’s completed?”

Sam smiled, imagining Leanne seeing him now, able to actually do something about the things she’d been unearthing over all those years. “I want all of the places that aren’t using the very best anti-pollution technology to have it fitted as soon as possible.”

Looks were exchanged around the table. Susan was frowning at the tablet computer beneath her fingers as the Eagle stared at Sam.

“That would cost a huge amount of money,” he said. “And it’s not even necessary—we already comply with local code.”

“You’re telling me that clean-air technology isn’t necessary in the places where there’s the most pollution? Really? That doesn’t make any sense. And anyway, you told me right at the start of this meeting that this corporation makes billions in profit every year. Are you seriously telling me CoFerrum can’t afford to do this?”

“I have no idea how much it would cost,” the Eagle replied, “but CoFerrum’s continued success depends upon minimising costs to maintain those profits.”

“What for? So you all get massive bonuses? So I get to live like Amir did?”

He’d hit a nerve and every person around the table—with the exception of a jowly ginger-haired man at the far end—looked distinctly uncomfortable. Sam tried to remember what job that man did, but failed.

“It’s all a question of return on investment,” the Eagle said.

“Correction.” Sam was getting into it now. “It used to be all about return on investment. That’s going to change now.”

The Eagle looked at Susan and so did several others. When she noticed she set the tablet down on the table and smiled at Sam. “Mr Ferran, CoFerrum is a huge global corporation composed of multiple subsidiary companies and interests. It’s like a fleet of aircraft carriers. You can’t just change course and take off in another direction as fast as you could if you were in a private yacht. Like that fleet, CoFerrum needs to be carefully coordinated in terms of its mid- to long-term direction and each part—each ship, if you will—needs to be given enough notice in order to be able to change direction without crashing into each other. It takes time to implement a radical change in priorities.”

“That’s just what corporates say to keep things the way they like them.”

She smiled, but it wasn’t to reassure him. “Mr Ferran, it really isn’t like that. There are multiple factors that need to be considered, not the least of which is the fact we’re halfway through the financial year and budgets for this one and the next have already been allocated.”

“Oh, come on, surely we can just change that!”

“No, we can’t. You have to understand that once budgets are set it enables multiple levels of management to allocate spending in accordance with their division’s needs. That involves procurement of services and products from hundreds of suppliers not owned by CoFerrum. If we suddenly withdrew millions of pounds and told the directors to spend them on different things it would create all sorts of contractual problems and destroy a lot of excellent working relationships.”

“But—”

“Not to mention a ripple effect that could cause the collapse of many SMEs who depend on the work we give them. Mr Ferran, please appreciate that the decisions you’re talking about have many, many ramifications that may not be immediately apparent. In effect, we’re not only responsible for the continued employment of the thousands of CoFerrum employees, but also for the companies we pay for goods and services.”

Sam tried to work out whether she was telling the truth or just being obstructive. He realised that it was probably both. The image of Leanne watching him with a proud smile on his face evaporated. “It doesn’t change the fact that I want things to be different.”

“Of course not,” Susan said smoothly. “It’s natural for you to want to put your own mark on the company. You may have to accept that it will take longer than you thought.”

“And you might have to accept that these environmental considerations aren’t in keeping with CoFerrum,” the Eagle said.

Sam wondered if he could sack him, then and there.

“I don’t know,” the ginger-haired man said. “I think Mr Ferran’s vision could prove immensely beneficial to the public image of the corporation.”

“Oh, for Christ’s sake, Duncan,” the Eagle said, evidently reaching the end of his patience. “This isn’t PR fluff! A change in environmental

compliance policy could cost the corporation millions and millions of pounds."

Sam remembered Duncan was the head of PR, several levels above Neugent. "You're right," Duncan said to the Eagle. "It's not fluff. It's bold, it's radical and it's in tune with the public, who are more aware of these issues than ever before. I've had to lock down some serious incidents which could have cost the corporation millions of pounds, and that expenditure would have just been to get our arses out of the bear-trap with no other benefits whatsoever. If we repositioned CoFerrum as the world's most socially and environmentally responsible corporation, it wouldn't just be a PR exercise, it would make it easier to—"

"Why don't we take this one step at a time," Susan said. "Let's get the report compiled for Mr Ferran and look at the costs involved. It may be that we could prioritise certain operations that would have the greatest PR impact whilst we look at the plausibility of a global change in policy."

The Eagle and Duncan nodded and Susan looked back at Sam. "Is there anything else, Mr Ferran?"

"No," he said, wanting to go to his local in Bath and have a beer or six with Dave. "That's it for now."

He slumped in the chair as they all packed up and left, the Eagle the first to leave. Duncan looked like he was heading towards Sam but Susan diverted his attention and they left together in close conference. Sam was left at the table with abandoned crystal glasses, a couple of jugs of water and the beginning of a headache.

"How did it go?"

He swivelled in the chair to see Mazzi in the doorway. "I have no idea. I thought it was going well at one point. I think I freaked them out."

She smiled. "Probably not a bad thing to shake them up a bit. Drink?"

He stood and stretched. “God, yes.”

“Find one you want to sack?”

“Yeah,” he went over to her.

“That’s normal,” she said and rested a hand on his shoulder. “It will get easier. I promise.”

He didn’t believe her.

21

Cathy adjusted the seat in the car Max had hired and checked the positioning of the rear-view mirror as he went round to the passenger side and got in. The last time she drove it had been to London to rescue Josh, and Tom had been the passenger. So much had changed since then, including, she realised with a tension in her chest, herself. She'd been so determined to find a way out of Society and now she was Duchess, a bigger cog in the machine she'd stopped trying to run away from. Was she doing the right thing in trying to stay and change things for the better? Or had she lost her way and forgotten what it was like to be alone and truly think for herself?

"We need to get onto the M4," Max said, looking at a map.

"We'll head west then," she replied and started the engine.

It felt good to be back in a car and mundane clothes again. "Thanks for letting me drive," she said but Max didn't reply. Now she was getting used to being around him she enjoyed the lack of pressure to make small talk. She suspected the gargoyle was hidden in the boot.

She was grateful for a trip out of Londinium too. The meeting with Margritte had made her feel guilty and inept and she couldn't stop berating herself for bothering her at such a time. Of course Margritte would be angry and grieving; it was stupid to have even thought of contacting her for anything to do with the secret group. It only served to remind her that she was no good at the people thing. It had taken Lucy to point out there were

other women who felt the same about Society. Her inability to think about anything other than her own frustrations had been revealed again.

“Take the left lane,” Max said, and she indicated after checking the mirrors.

The roads were busy. Negotiating the traffic and following Max’s navigation was a welcome distraction from worrying about Margritte and what would be reported back to Bennet. At least Will had left before Max arrived. He’d be on his way to meet Margritte now, unaware of this secret excursion until Carter reported it all to him.

“Poor Carter,” she said aloud. “He’ll be worrying.”

“I told him I would take full responsibility.”

“Those magic words,” she said with a sigh.

Cathy had no idea what arrangements Will had made to meet Margritte; once she’d talked it through with him he’d agreed to meet her as soon as possible and handle the rest himself. She took that as a good sign. He seemed relieved she’d made contact with her, thinking it was in the hope of reducing the animosity between their families to avert any further disruption. Cathy hadn’t been able to bring herself to tell him she’d had her own agenda, even though she’d wanted to share it with him. Worrying about what to tell and what to keep to herself was exhausting. She’d rather share it all with him, but that was unwise until she’d convinced him of the need to change the status quo.

Will was kinder than most but he was still one of them, a product of their patriarchal society and so concerned with keeping Lord Iris happy that he couldn’t contemplate anything remotely controversial. She could sympathise, but she couldn’t wait for him to feel secure enough in his position before she did something herself.

Max was a good navigator and they made it to the slip road onto the M4 without any wrong turns. “So,” she said, once she was at the right speed and feeling more confident in the faster traffic. “Can you tell me where we’re going now?”

“You asked me to look into a code you found in several files. The code ‘GDA’ refers to ‘Green Dale Asylum’ and several of the people you’ve requested files on are there.”

“An asylum in Mundanus?”

“Yes, run by the Agency. Only they and the Patroons know about it. I suspect the mundane authorities are oblivious of its existence too. It’s in the Cotswolds. I have the address and I thought it best to go there via mundane means.”

“I bet they’re not put in there because they’re mad,” Cathy said, gripping the steering wheel tighter and pressing down on the accelerator.

“Some of the people there may have lost their faculties,” Max said. “But I suspect the ones you’re looking for haven’t.”

“No, they wanted to hide them away so they would stop saying things the Patroons didn’t like. Are they just left in Mundanus to get old and die?”

“It seems so,” Max replied.

“So you’re coming along because you’re curious?”

“I doubt they would let you in without me. And I want to understand everything the Agency does.”

“Are they breaching the Treaty?”

“That’s one of the questions I want to answer.”

She almost asked him what the other questions were but decided against it; he wouldn’t tell her anyway.

So the men and women who’d disappeared from the secret group had been sent to a mundane asylum to die quietly, just because they’d spoken

out. Perhaps the remaining members were right to be so cautious. Margritte had spoken of needing Will on her side and Cathy resented the fact it was true. But would Lord Iris sanction having her packed off when he was so keen for her to breed?

“I wonder if the Fae know.”

“They must. They would notice their puppets were missing.” Max said.

“I don’t know how much attention they pay. Lord Poppy probably didn’t even know I existed until he heard about me going to university.”

“Was he involved in securing your marriage to William Iris?”

“I know Lord Iris was. Will told me the Patroon said he wanted us to marry.”

“Do you know why?”

“To breed is my theory.” Out of the corner of her eye she could see Max nodding. “But I have no idea why it has to be Will and I.”

“You must both have qualities Lord Iris wants to see in one child. Or several,” Max said. “The Agency do the same—they breed with certain pairings to make it more likely that certain qualities will be seen in the—keep your eye on the road, Catherine.”

She yanked the wheel back, realising she’d started to drift across a lane. “The Agency have a breeding program? What the fuck?”

“The head of the Agency told me the Fae have been doing the same for generations. Were your parents matched by the Fae?”

“I don’t know. God, this is awful. Will doesn’t think it’s the norm for his patron to be so involved. I’ve heard marriages are arranged by the head of the families and it’s all to do with money or politics. I’m certain they married Tom to Lucy for the money—the Californicas are loaded.”

“They probably needed it for your dowry,” Max said and Cathy felt nauseous.

“Shit. You’re right. That’s the only way the Irises would have been happy to have their golden boy married to a dud like me: a tonne of money. Bastards, the lot of them.” The clouds and greenery of Mundanus seemed to have reawakened the joy of swearing too.

“Which qualities do you both have that would make Lord Iris interested in your children?”

“I don’t have a clue. I don’t have any qualities. None that Society wants anyway.”

“The Fae are not the same as those in your Society though. He may want something different.”

Cathy breathed deep, hoping her breakfast would settle in her stomach again. Even though she’d already suspected it, it terrified her to hear an Arbiter talking about the possibility she and Will had been matched for that reason. “But what would Lord Iris want the child for? Assuming he got the combination of qualities he wanted.”

“I don’t know. We only monitor theft of children from Mundanus, not the Nether. Have you heard of children from the families being taken by the Fae?”

“I’ve heard all kinds of stories, but I always assumed they were to frighten us into being good. Are you convinced that people in Society need protection yet?”

“No,” Max replied. “You people are still not protected by the Treaty.”

“But why? We’re just as human as the people in Mundanus.”

“But not innocent.”

“You make it sound like we’re guilty of something. I didn’t choose to be born into that Society. And I tried to get away from it. If you’d helped me that first time I met you, I wouldn’t be in the mess I’m in now.”

The conversation died and she focused on the road. She would have to tell Will what Max had said. Please don't be pregnant, she thought, trying to detect any change in the way her body felt. Between the nerves and the anger, it was hard to tell whether there was anything else going on.

They drove for over an hour without saying anything. It was almost like driving alone; there was no sense of there being someone with her unless she actually looked at him.

"Do you want to listen to some music?"

"No."

"Do you mind if I do?"

"No."

She flipped between radio stations but was unable to find anything she liked so she switched it off again. "So…what's it like being an Arbiter?"

"We need to take the next exit," he said, looking down at the map again.

"Did you always want to be one?"

"Take the third exit off the roundabout."

She changed lanes and followed a bright yellow car for a while. "How do you even become an Arbiter anyway?"

"There's a crossroads coming up," he said. "Turn right and then take the second left."

She stayed silent for the rest of the trip. They ended up driving down a bumpy single-lane road that turned into a glorified track through fields populated with cows. Just as she was about to tell him he must have got it wrong they saw a set of wooden gates with a letterbox in one of the supporting posts. "Green Dale" was carved into the stone above it.

Cathy stopped the car in front of them and Max got out. The gates were unlocked, which surprised her. He got back in and she drove forwards slowly, avoiding potholes in the gravel-covered road.

“I have nothing to say about what it’s like to be an Arbiter,” he said out of the blue. “I was selected from a large group of potentials. I passed the tests.”

“Were they hard?”

“…Yes,” he finally replied.

She drove slowly, wanting to ask more but knowing it would have to wait for another time. There were landscaped gardens on either side of them with large, mature trees at the boundary. As they rounded the corner a huge house came into view, obscured from the road by the trees at the edge of the estate. It had an extensive terrace and Cathy could see people sitting on chairs with blankets over their laps.

“Park over there,” Max said, pointing to an empty parking area on the left. “I’ll go first and make sure there isn’t going to be a problem.”

“Can I look for the people I wanted to find?”

He nodded. “Keep me in sight if you can. I doubt they’ll do anything to the Duchess of Londinium, but it pays to be careful.”

“Don’t tell them who I am,” she said and they got out of the car.

He went ahead as she locked it. A nurse was already hurrying into the house from the terrace, probably to raise the alarm. As she got closer she could see several elderly men and women watching the new arrival with interest.

They were dressed like they were still in Society and it looked so odd to see the period clothing in Mundanus. A woman came out of the house to intercept Max on the steps up onto the terrace and a short exchange resulted in Max being shown in. He turned and gave her a curt nod and Cathy took that as a confirmation that she could go ahead. She only hoped she would find answers instead of more questions.

By the time Will had finished casting each Charm he felt invulnerable. No blade could cut him, if anything containing poison came near him the pendant resting on the skin over his heart would grow hot, and no Persuasion, Lust, Love or Hate Charms would have any effect on him, nor would any others created to alter his opinion. Tate had prepared the assortment for him and given a lengthy description of each one's benefits, and instructions for either casting them or placing artefacts in different places on his body. He'd used several before and heard of all the rest but had never used them in concert. He'd sent a bottle of the finest champagne and an obscenely expensive box of chocolates in return.

He was dressed in a modern suit and wearing a long coat to protect him against the mundane wind and rain as he stood in a doorway across the street. He'd opted to arrive early and keep a low profile, blending in with the mundanes as much as possible. He was waiting for one of his footmen to return and assure him that all was well at the hotel he'd chosen for his meeting with Margritte. It was easy to hire a private room with no Nether reflection halfway between London and Oxford, something he hoped would show his willingness to accommodate her needs. He wasn't going to tell her what really happened but he was happy to give her condolences if the conversation went well. Cathy was convinced it would be best for everyone and the decent thing to do. He hadn't argued with her on that point.

Nevertheless, he wasn't going to be complacent. He'd taken every precaution, preparing for the meeting as if it were with the head of a rival family rather than simply a grieving widow. Margritte was no fool and there was always the possibility she'd convinced the Tulipa Patroon to support her should she wish to humiliate him in some way. He'd denied their family true political power and that wouldn't be forgotten for a very long time.

“It’s clear, your Grace,” the footman said. “No trace of any Charms and nobody has been in the room since it was cleaned early this morning. None of the guests in the lobby nor any of the staff on duty have been Charmed and all staff identities have been confirmed.”

“Excellent,” Will replied. “How are you bearing up?” He’d cast a Clear Sight Charm on the man that morning, giving him the ability to see anyone or anything that had been Charmed or Glamoured. Tate had sent it for him to use but Will didn’t want to suffer the side effect: severe depression for a few days once it had worn off.

“It’s…interesting, your Grace. I’m glad to be of service.”

“You’ll be on reduced duties for the next week, should no emergencies arise,” Will assured him. “I’ll wait in the meeting room. When Mrs Tulipa arrives check her whilst she’s being escorted and report to me should there be anything I need to know. You know what to look out for.”

“Yes, your Grace. I’ll escort you there now.”

Will knew he was skating the fine line between caution and paranoia; even if she was wearing an artefact it was highly unlikely it would be able to affect him whilst so well protected. Better to be safe and home in time for dinner. He’d just finished reading *The Time Machine* and planned to discuss it with Cathy over a special meal he’d planned with the cook. She’d been working so hard to be everything he needed her to be; it was time to show her how much he appreciated it. And he wanted to see the smile the gift of the library had brought out again.

They crossed the street and the footman took him through to the meeting room after a brief exchange with the receptionist. Being back in a hotel made him yearn for the Grand Tour again, for that feeling of arriving somewhere new and knowing that fresh delights were soon to be discovered.

“This is the room, your Grace.”

There was only a small table and two comfortable chairs near the window. They’d followed his instructions precisely: no mirrors, only one door in and out and secure windows. The first was to reduce the opportunity to open a Way into Exilium, the latter two to provide better mundane security.

“Good. Tell the others to take their positions.”

Margritte arrived on time and Will was given a chance to compose himself as she was escorted to the room. His footman informed him she was wearing a simple Charm to keep her clothes clean and dry, one commonly used by those visiting Mundanus, but nothing else.

When she entered in her widow’s garb Will found it more unsettling than he’d anticipated. As they went through the motions of polite greetings he was forced to see the impact of his actions. She was evidently still in deep mourning; not only was she wearing black, she was pale and had lost weight. More than that; she’d lost the joy he hadn’t realised—until now—she’d radiated before.

His footmen followed her in and stood just inside the door. He felt safe.

“Thank you for agreeing to meet me,” she said. She was tense. So was he.

“Catherine told me you were keen to speak. It may be meaningless, given the circumstances, but I am very sad about what happened between our families.”

She stared at him, as if weighing the worth of his words. He hoped she would see his sincerity through grief’s veil. “Have you found the person who really tried to kill Catherine?”

Will breathed out and in again, wondering what he could say to ease her pain without condemning himself in the process. “I consider the matter

behind us.”

“You have that luxury,” she said. “I, however, do not. William, I believed you to be a decent man, as did Bartholomew. Surely you cannot think it right to leave things as they are. We both know Bartholomew was innocent. Tell me you know that to be so. Explain to me how you were led to believe otherwise, so I can find some peace again.”

“There’s nothing I can say that will bring him back.”

“You can restore my family’s honour.”

“I’m sorry. I can’t. I feel wretched about what happened but there is nothing I can do to change the situation we find ourselves in.”

“I’ll ask you one last time.” She took a step towards him but most of the room was still between them. “Please tell the truth in the Court and clear his name. Let him be remembered as the man he was and let me mourn him in peace. He was not a murderer.”

Will kept his lips pressed together and shook his head.

“So be it,” she whispered and took a step back again.

There was a tremor in the air and his men had hands on their pistols in moments. Will reached for his sword, drawing it enough to break its Glamour, and felt a dampness on his chest. Thinking it was blood, he looked down to see a blue stain penetrating the cotton of his shirt in the place where the artefact had rested against his heart, as if the glass it was made of had turned to water.

The feeling of speed and sharp reflexes left him and he realised the Charms he’d so carefully prepared were failing. As Margritte watched he felt a sudden pressure on his ring finger. The wedding band—looking like oak once more—burst as if filled with too much air and his hand and fingers were filled with the sharp stab of hundreds of tiny splinters. The

blade of his sword crumbled, one forged hundreds of years before, given to him when he came of age.

“Your Grace!” one of the men had time to shout before a tear in the air revealed another room, windowless and unfamiliar, through which stepped several suited men wearing bowler hats. They were followed by a scruffy mundane man who was grinning.

Before Will’s footmen could reach him they were cut off by the hatted men, all of whom had modern pistols trained on their faces.

“Who—”

“You are in the Kingdom of Mercia, under jurisdiction of the Oxford Chapter and in the domain of Rupert, Sorcerer Guardian of Mercia,” one of the hatted men announced.

“That’s me,” the scruffy man said.

“Any further action will be considered a breach of the Split Worlds treaty and you’ll be prosecuted accordingly.”

The unlikely Sorcerer looked at Margritte. “You OK, Maggie?”

She gave the slightest nod. “He won’t clear his name.”

“Well, we knew that would be the case, didn’t we?”

“This is none of your concern, Sorcerer,” Will said. “I am the Duke of Londinium and this is a private meeting with no risk to any innocents.”

“This is my domain,” Rupert said. “Everything that happens in Mercia is my concern. I don’t give a flying fuck that you’re the Duke of Londinium —that’s thirty miles away and you’re here, right now, not doing the decent thing.”

Will looked at Margritte, still reeling from the fact that a Sorcerer seemed to be involved in her private affairs. Cathy had mentioned she lived in Oxenford now, but nothing about a Sorcerer. “How is this to play out,

Margritte? If you act against me, the entirety of the Iris family—including Lord Iris himself—will seek—”

Rupert blew a loud raspberry. “Oh, blah, blah, blah. Yes, you’re not happy and it’s all most irregular and all of that arse.” He flicked the fingers of his right hand and a silver yo-yo dropped from it to bounce straight back up again. “Do you have a yo-yo?” he asked when he saw Will watching it.

“I did when I was a child.”

“Could you do tricks?” Rupert caught the string on the forefinger of his left hand. “This one is called ‘Round the World’.” The yo-yo did a circle around his head and segued perfectly into the next bounce. “This one’s called ‘Walking the Dog’,” he said before Will could get a word in. He crouched and the yo-yo rolled along the rug before being jerked back up the string. “But this one is my favourite. It’s called ‘You’re fucked’.”

Faster than his eye could track it, Rupert jerked the yo-yo towards the floor in front of Will’s feet. Then he was falling through a hole that had opened in the floor, and landing with a loud thud in an empty room. He toppled, a terrible bright pain shooting through his right ankle. There was no door, no window, just a box-like space dimly lit by the light coming through the hole above him.

“You’ve no right to do this!” he shouted up at the opening.

Rupert was peering down at him, the hateful grin filling his face. “I absolutely do, Dukey boy. It’s my domain. Ekstrand isn’t going to help you now.”

“But I haven’t done anything!”

Margritte came to Rupert’s side. “Neither did Bartholomew,” she said and the hole closed, plunging Will into absolute darkness.

22

Max watched Catherine carefully as they walked out of the asylum. She paused when she was about to unlock the car, turning to look towards the trees edging the estate.

“Which way do we go?”

Max pointed to the drive, only metres away and in plain view. “The way we came in.”

Catherine’s eyes skimmed over it, like she hadn’t even seen it. “Which way to get to the driveway?”

Max’s suspicion was confirmed; none of the inmates tried to escape because there was a Charm to obfuscate the way out. “I’ll drive,” he said.

“There’s the road!” she said once they were a mile or so away from the house. “Oh. That’s why they don’t escape, isn’t it?”

Max nodded. The people at the asylum seemed to be treated well. At least they were clean, well dressed and well fed. Max hadn’t built up any firm expectations but wouldn’t have been surprised to find a Bedlam-like institution considering how out of pace with Mundanus the rest of Society was. The agency wasn’t behind the times, even if their clients were.

When Max had said Derne knew he was there, he was introduced to the manager, a round-faced man who tried his best to understand why Max was there but was none the wiser by the time the tour was over.

The security was incredibly low-key, consisting of nothing more than a few burly orderlies who would be capable of throwing someone over their shoulder and carrying them back in the event of attempted escape. The

manager said—several times—that no one had ever tried and that the residents were very happy.

As Max had suspected, some of the inmates had been placed there when life in the Nether had got too much for them. The latest arrival was a man called Archie, formerly of the Wisteria line, who'd been unable to control his cravings for fresh air and blue sky. He'd been found in a mundane hospital by his brother after suffering a nervous breakdown.

"He's very happy here," the manager had said cheerily. "It's everything he wanted and the family don't have anything to worry about. They couldn't afford the Charms to put him right, you see."

"What about the ones who haven't had a nervous breakdown?" Max asked.

"I'm sorry, I don't know who you mean."

"The ones put here because they have controversial opinions."

"They have just the same problems, Mr Arbiter. They're unable to cope with the demands of Nether Society and say the most outlandish things as part of their madness. Raging against accepted behaviour is simply a cry for help."

"A cry for help?" Catherine said when Max reported it to her. "Bollocks. I don't know what to do. It seems wrong to just go home and do nothing about it."

"The Patroons know, and some of the people there were placed by their families," Max said. "You would upset a lot of powerful people if you challenged it."

She nodded, chewing her thumbnail. She was silent for almost an hour, staring out of the window. "And all of that stuff you told me about the Agency breeding perfect staff and the way they treat them…like slaves. It

isn’t right. But it’s all so big. I don’t know what to do about it all. I just know it’s wrong.”

There was a thud in the boot and she twisted to look into the back of the car. “Did we just hit something?”

“No.”

“I don’t even know who’s in charge of the Agency, or where they’re based. Even if I did I wouldn’t know what to do.”

Another *thunk*, this time louder, as Max exited the motorway and headed into the outskirts of London.

“There’s something wrong with the car,” Catherine said and he shook his head.

“There isn’t.”

The back portion of the rear passenger seat was knocked into the foot-well and the gargoyle poked its head through the gap between car and boot.

“So you were in there.” Catherine stretched back and clasped the gargoyle’s paw.

“The whole bloody time.” It clambered onto the back seat; at least it had the sense to stretch itself along the width of the car to keep out of sight of the other drivers. “We need to talk.”

“We need to stay focused,” Max said. “You know what we have to do after we’ve taken Catherine home.”

“That’s exactly the reason why,” the gargoyle replied. “If we die without telling anyone about what the Agency is doing, nothing will put a stop to it.” It shuffled about so its head was closer to Catherine. “I need to tell you so I know that something will be done. Ekstrand doesn’t give a rat’s arse and he’s mental anyway.”

Catherine repositioned herself so she was facing the gargoyle more comfortably. “All right. I’m listening.” She looked at Max. “Are you OK?”

“He’s fine,” the gargoyle said. “Listen to me. The Agency headquarters is a place that only exists in the Nether without an anchor property and the only way it can make that is by keeping all these people in the basement like…like…machines.” It described everything Max had seen, as if it had been in that room with him.

“My God, is there anything these people aren’t doing?” Catherine said, and then asked questions about what they saw that day the Agency was taken over, which the gargoyle answered readily. Max focused on the road and the heavy traffic. The gargoyle was trusting her with sensitive information. Should he pull over and kick her out of the car? Why hadn’t he done that already?

“It’s because she needs to understand how bad this is,” the gargoyle said to him. “It’s because we know we need to do something.”

“But they’re not protected by the Treaty.”

“Did I miss something?” Catherine asked but the gargoyle was focused on Max.

“But they’re being screwed over like we were. Don’t you get it? We’re just the same as those poor bastards strapped in those chairs: we’re nothing but a tool, made for a specific purpose. We didn’t choose this, just like they didn’t.”

“What do you mean?” Catherine asked.

“This isn’t the right time,” Max replied.

“Why are you afraid of her knowing this?” the gargoyle asked. “You don’t really think it’s ever going to go back to the way it was, do you? Most of the Sorcerers are dead and the two that are left are trying to kill each other. Ekstrand is a fruitloop. We’re on our own. We’ve come this far without his orders, why not do the right thing whilst we’re being insubordinate?”

Max pulled over when he saw a parking space free at the rear of Catherine's anchor property. Catherine was staring at him.

"You can't show me the asylum and tell me all this stuff about the Agency and think I'll just forget about it."

"I don't."

"Then what are we going to do?"

"I have to speak to someone," Max said, thinking of Faulkner's Chapter Master. "I think he'll lead us to the root of these problems."

"And then will we do something?"

"I don't know. I need to think about it."

Catherine groaned. "I'm going." She glanced at the gargoyle. "I hope you come back. And I hope you can convince him to get off his arse and commit to taking action."

"I'll do my best." It grinned at her and she left.

They sat in silence for a few moments, then Max noticed the time on the dashboard clock. "We'd better get moving," he said. "The Chapter Master will be at the park soon. And we're already taking action," he added, prompted by the gargoyle's stare.

Sam pumped the bellows until the fire was hot enough and put in a length of iron. It was the first time he'd been in the forge since his predecessor's suicide. He'd been apprehensive about coming in, fearing it would trigger unpleasant memories. It made him think about what happened but he no longer felt unsettled. He just wanted to beat the iron until he was ready to go back to Exilium.

The meeting with the Directors wasn't a clear success or an obvious failure. He decided to feel good about starting the ball rolling at least and as

time went on and he learned more about how it all worked he would make the changes he wanted. At least the PR guy was behind him. Instead, it was time to focus on the other benefits his new status accorded. Mazzi had said the Fae would fear him and he knew which one he wanted to terrify the most. But how to do it? How to get back to Exilium on his own terms, rather than at the summoning or permission of Lord Poppy? He wanted to take the Fae by surprise.

He looked down at the anvil, breathing in the sense of potential. What would he make as he considered his plan? A spear to run Poppy through? A sword to threaten him with, like Cathy's husband had wielded? He swore at the thought of her stuck with him, deluding herself into thinking she could do something about the way they lived. As soon as he was free of Poppy's interference, he'd go and free her too.

He went to pull out the iron but found himself drawn back to the anvil. The floor had been scrubbed and he noticed a feature for the first time: the anvil was resting on a solid circle of iron set into the floor. At its edges he could see slivers of what looked like copper, running at intervals around it. He pulled the length of iron from the fire and abandoned it in the plunge bucket, steam accompanying the loud hiss of hot metal meeting cold water.

Grunting with effort, Sam pulled the anvil off the circle, certain that, without the "affinity" Mazzi had spoken of, he'd never have been able to budge it an inch. He crouched down and scraped the black grime from the groove between the circle and the flagstones and had a sudden sense of its base being deep in the earth, so deep that the forge had been built around and on top of it, rather than being set into the floor as a feature.

He pulled the abandoned rod of iron from the bucket, tossed it aside and threw the water over the circle, washing away the outline of dirt left by the anvil base. It was solid iron and close to the diameter of a postbox. He

thought of the pillar in Exilium, the one Poppy couldn't bear to be near. That had been a similar size and also had copper riveted to it. Then he noticed a haze in the air. He thought for a moment that it was steam from the cooling rod but that had already dissipated. He stared at the iron set into the floor and the haziness increased until it was as if a fog were forming in the air. He crouched down beside it as the tiny hairs on his arms and the back of his neck prickled, and reached towards the space above the circle. Where he thought his fingers would pass through the air, they instead brushed iron.

There was a terrific lurch in his stomach and he tipped forwards, his hands slapping against iron with copper bands riveted around it, familiar formulae etched into the metal. He was on his knees, palms still on the metal, and no longer saw the forge, only mists, as if the strange fog that had been rising now encompassed everything. Then he realised he wasn't in the squat little building in Mundanus any more. He was in the Nether and the iron was stretching ahead of him now, like a path through the void.

Cathy pulled off her gloves and dumped them on the chair, feeling exhausted and yet as tightly wound as a nervous man's watch. She felt as if she needed a release, like a long cry or the opportunity to scream at someone, but neither was forthcoming.

She was too full of terrible knowledge. How could she sit there in her library in front of the fire when so many people were being mistreated? Her efforts felt like they'd come to nothing; she'd found people who knew Rainer but they were either unwilling to help her or incapable of it. She knew about the atrocities committed by the Agency but felt powerless to act. Bennet had managed to curse her once already; if she moved against

them she had no doubt he would see his threats through and she'd be hauled in front of Dame Iris and probably shipped off to the asylum herself. That Will knew her past would make no difference if the Irises were publicly humiliated.

Could she rely on Max to come back and form a plan with her? He was acting without the knowledge of the Sorcerer. Would he be able to take on the Agency without his Master's blessing?

There was a knock on the door and Morgan entered with a note on a small silver tray. Cathy recognised Bennet's handwriting before she touched it.

> *I am aware of the visits from a certain Arbiter and your recent contact with Charlotte Persificola-Viola. If you continue to pry into matters that are no concern of yours, I will contact Dame Iris and have a frank conversation with her about your previous interests.*

"Morgan!" Cathy called him back from the doorway, planning to show him the evidence of blackmail, but by the time he'd crossed the room the ink was sliding from the page like mascara in the rain.

"Is there a reply, your Grace?"

"No," she said, crumpling the paper in her fist. "No reply."

Cathy went to the fire and threw the note onto it, then put both hands on the chimney breast, leaning over until she felt the warmth. She had decided to stay in the Nether with a head full of noble ideals but still felt powerless. Had she made the wrong choice? Was she deluding herself that anything could be done by one woman?

She shut her eyes, letting her head droop between her arms, thinking of the people she'd left at the asylum, the truths the gargoyle told and Max

talking about the Fae and the Agency matching people for goodness knows what. She thought of Miss Rainer scrubbing pans, a shadow of herself, and Charlotte, trapped in her own body and living in a gilded prison. And what had she done since she'd made the decision to stay instead of run away? Looked for someone else to help her, looked for a group of people to get behind, looked to Will to stand up and fight the system so she could stand beside him.

"I'm still a coward," she whispered. She wasn't going to find someone to show her the way to change things because that person didn't exist. She had to do it herself. She would find a way to free all of the people held by the Agency, and she'd find a way to give women a voice and recognition and rights in Society even if it meant destroying her own life in the process.

A pulse of magic rippled out from her, making her fingertips tingle as it left her body. The third wish! She'd felt something similar for the first and second when they were cast, but when she told Lord Poppy her last wish she'd felt nothing. Until now. She knew what her true potential was: it was to change Society by becoming the force of change herself.

The place to start was the asylum and the main obstacle was Bennet. She needed to distract him long enough to go there herself and lead those people out. Out where? The flat in Manchester was too small and there would be no way to protect them there anyway. She thought of the empty rooms in the house and imagined them filled with illegal guests. The thought made her smile but the staff would report back to Bennet and she couldn't keep him distracted for that long. She needed to change the household into a safe haven by the time he realised what she'd done.

She straightened, took a deep breath and then called for Carter. He entered and stood to attention. "Yes, your Grace?"

“Carter…shut the door. The Arbiter wasn’t here about the attack. He took me to a place in Mundanus where people are being kept prisoner even though they’ve done nothing wrong. People who used to live in Society. They’re being left there to get old and die.”

He looked appalled. “Why would the Arbiter do such a thing? And why did you go, your Grace? You could have been at risk.”

She realised he was more upset about that than about the news of the place itself. “Because I asked him to find some people who disappeared. And we didn’t tell you because I know that you report to Bennet.” She paused, expecting the usual tightness in her chest that always came when she thought about Bennet and what he held over her. But there was no change. “He’s been…” she took a breath, ready for the coughing fit to start any second. “Bennet has blackmailed and threatened me.”

The curse had been broken! Of course, how could she reach her potential with that constraining her? Poppy’s magic had actually done something useful!

Carter was gawping at her. “I had no idea, your Grace.”

“He cursed me so I couldn’t tell anyone.”

“Mr Bennet said I had to report all your movements to him as well as the Duke to ensure your safety. He said all personal guards of people of your status have that duty.” He looked down at the carpet. “I should tender my resignation. I failed in my—”

“Oh, don’t be ridiculous,” Cathy said. “You couldn’t possibly have known.”

“I can only offer you my word that I will not make any more reports on your actions to Mr Bennet. I trust you’ll tell the Duke upon his return?”

“Yes, I will. But quite frankly there are much more important things to worry about now. I can’t just carry on with my life knowing about that

asylum. I have to do something and I want to free those people and bring them here, to stay, until they get back on their feet and work out what they want to do for themselves."

"I see, your Grace. This sounds like a noble thing to do."

"It's run by the Agency and Bennet is in charge of it."

His expression darkened. "But if the Agency are—"

"Listen, I need your help to get them out. The Agency don't have the right to keep them there, and it's only one of a long list of terrible things they're doing. They've been keeping all kinds of people silenced for the Patroons for far too long now and it has to stop. Now, I understand if you don't want any part of it, but I want to offer you a choice. If you want to help me do the right thing, I'll support your resignation from the Agency and I'll pay your wages myself. You'll have the same job security and—"

"I'm sorry, your Grace, I don't understand what you mean. I don't receive wages."

"But I've been paying the Agency thousands of pounds for everyone's…" Cathy shook her head. None of that money had been passed on to the staff and they had no idea the Agency were charging money supposedly for them. Of course not. Why in the Worlds would the Agency teach their indoctrinated slaves about the right to earn a living? "All right. You have the choice to come with me and free those people—if you do, I'll make sure the Agency don't take you away and you'll be my personal employee. That means I'll give you money for you to spend on whatever you like, and time off when you want it. Or you can let me go by myself."

"I should, in fact, stop you from going at all, with all respect, your Grace. The Duke gave me explicit orders."

She folded her arms. "That may be so, but unless you want to lock me in a box, that isn't going to happen. I know you're a good person, Carter,

you just didn’t know what the Agency is capable of. I need you. I need you to help me do the right thing.”

She didn’t take her eyes off him, hoping he would see her conviction. After what seemed like an age, he nodded. “I’ll help you, your Grace. I trust you know what’s best.” She thought it would be harder to convince him. Was it the wish magic? “But if we’re going to do something that might upset the Agency, we need to convince the rest of the staff it’s the right thing to do too. I know enough about them to be able to advise you on the best way to approach it.”

Cathy nodded. “You’re right. I’ll call a meeting. Everything’s going to change now, Carter.” When he frowned she smiled as confidently as she could. “But it’s all going to be for the better. I’m sure of it.”

It took only moments for Will to explore the boundaries of his prison, then he had no choice but to wait. He worried about the air running out, then decided Margritte wouldn’t have gone to all the trouble to engineer his kidnapping only to leave him to suffocate in a large box. Besides, the Sorcerer or the Arbiters could have killed him just as easily as imprisoning him.

There was total silence, not even the slightest vibration in the floor. Will suspected the prison was a Sorcerous construct in the Nether and that rescue was therefore probably impossible. He sat in the corner and the fingers on his left hand started to sting. He tried to feel for any splinters but in the total darkness it was only possible to pull out the largest slivers of wood. It didn’t feel like he was bleeding enough to be a concern. The fact that the Sorcerer wielded magic capable of shattering a ring made by the Fae King and Queen both impressed and frightened him.

Will stretched his legs out and felt his right ankle throb. It wasn't painful enough to be broken, but was still uncomfortable.

He rested his head against the corner where the two walls met and took a few moments to breathe deeply and steady himself. He'd had a shock and it was natural to feel frightened in the circumstances, so he permitted himself a few moments of unbridled fear. He blinked a few times, disturbed by how hard it was to know whether his eyes were open or closed, and wondered what they were going to do to him.

How had Margritte secured the support of a Sorcerer? And why had they mentioned Ekstrand? Will had only seen him for as long as the other people at the party; he hadn't even spoken to him. That night seemed like it was years ago but it was only a matter of months. He had the feeling there were other agendas playing out around him; the matter of the Londinium throne shouldn't be of any interest to the Sorcerer of Mercia, nor any of the others for that matter.

He heard the sound of a key in a lock and the adrenalin surged again. He managed to get to his feet before a crack of light revealed the opening of a door on the opposite side of the box. Whatever was about to happen, he was ready.

23

Cathy couldn’t stop grinning as she penned the note to Bennet. She’d waited as long as she could bear for Will to return but was so afraid she’d lose her nerve she decided to press on with her plan regardless. What did she want from him anyway? Permission to save people? She knew she probably shouldn’t have done anything without considering it all more carefully over a cup of tea, but since the magic had zipped through her she couldn’t bear the thought of keeping still. There would never be a good time and the consequences of her actions would never be anything but frightening.

Mr Bennet,

It’s imperative we meet urgently to discuss a matter regarding the Agency. My carriage will be waiting for you in the reflection of Bathurst Stables to convey you to Somerset House where we will be able to talk without my husband’s knowledge. Please come as soon as you are able.

Catherine Reticulata-Iris

She folded the paper, sealed it with wax and pulled the bell cord beside the fire. When Morgan arrived she handed him the letter. “This needs to be sent by Letterboxer. Please inform the footman that Mr Bennet from the Agency will require transport in our carriage from the stables to Somerset House and that he should be conveyed via the longest route possible. I need to be told as soon as the carriage leaves the stables.”

Morgan nodded and bowed. “At once, your Grace.”

“Is everything in hand?”

“Yes, the bedrooms are being prepared for guests, and extra food and fuel is being fetched from Mundanus.”

“Any word from Will?”

“No, your Grace. I’ll inform you as soon as he arrives.”

“Thank you, Morgan.”

She paced as she tried to think of ways to tell Will what she’d done. “Darling,” she said as if he was there. “While you were visiting Margritte, I secretly convinced the staff to break away from the Agency and form an independent household. The Agency doesn’t know yet.”

Cathy shook her head. “Darling,” she started again, imagining Will standing in front of her, frowning like he had when he asked her why she’d animated Nelson’s statue. “The Agency—no—Mr Bennet, from the Agency, has been blackmailing me and I thought it best to take away his control over our household by employing the staff myself, including the bodyguard you’ve been using to spy on me.” No! Too confrontational.

She tried a few more permutations but none of them sounded any good. She just wanted to get moving. The waiting was the worst thing about it all.

A knock on the door made her jump and Morgan entered. “Mr Bennet has arrived at the stables.”

“God, that was quick.” She took a deep breath and smiled at him. “This is it then, Morgan. Are you sure you want to stay and be involved in all this?”

“I am, your Grace.” He returned the smile. “In fact, may I say how pleased I am to have the opportunity to do so.”

“You rock, Morgan. Could you bring my hat, gloves and cape? I’m going dressed as I am.” She’d changed back into an outfit appropriate for

the Nether, knowing that the people at the asylum wouldn't believe she was the Duchess if she was wearing mundane clothing like she had been before.

Whilst she waited for him to return she realised how nervous she was. She'd set things in motion and there was no turning back; the staff were depending on her now in a way they didn't need to before. She had to see it through, no matter what Bennet did. She had no doubt he was going to reveal her secrets to Dame Iris, but the consequences of that seemed less important now than doing her best to free those people. She wondered how far Poppy's magic would protect her.

The slam of the front door made her heart race for a different reason; Will would have to be told and she didn't have time to explain it all to him.

"Get out of my way, fool!" The voice that penetrated the wood was not her husband's—thankfully not Bennet's either. She heard Carter's low rumble and then "I'm the Duke's brother, idiot, stand aside!"

The door banged open and Nathaniel barged in like a man about to leap into a brawl rather than enter his sister-in-law's company.

"Would you like me to remain in the room with you, your Grace?" Carter asked at the door, his cheeks a deep red.

"This is private!" Nathaniel slammed the door in Carter's face.

Cathy backed away from him until her skirts brushed one of the armchairs by the fire. She sat in it and tried to look as composed as possible. "Would you like to sit down and tell me what has upset you so?"

Nathaniel looked horrified. "Don't pretend you're ignorant of this!"

She sat. "Of what? Please, sit down and—"

He crossed the room and leaned over her chair, planting his hands on the arms and effectively caging her in. "Where is he?"

"Who?"

“William!” He glanced at her left hand and frowned at the wedding ring. “You really don’t know?”

“He went to meet Margritte.” Nathaniel didn’t move. “Margritte Semper-Augustus Tulipa. I don’t know where.”

“Why?”

“Because she wanted to speak to him. Will you please sit down?”

“William has disappeared and we think he’s been kidnapped.”

“What?”

“The Patroon has tasked me with finding him and bringing the kidnappers to justice.”

“Margritte wouldn’t do anything like that.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because I spoke to her and—”

Nathaniel moved so swiftly she didn’t realise he had until his hand was gripping her jaw. The last of the bruising from the attack twinged as he made her look up at him. “Did you lead him into a trap?”

“Of course I didn’t, you prat, let go of me!”

He squeezed tighter, until tears pricked at the corners of her eyes. “I know you didn’t want to marry him. Did you and your friend come up with a plan to—”

“Let me go!”

The door opened and Carter’s hand was on his shoulder in seconds. Nathaniel released her so he could bat the huge man away. Carter put himself between her chair and Nathaniel as she composed herself, rubbing her face. With a horrified jolt she realised it was the first time another man had touched her since the wedding day, but Nathaniel didn’t seem to be burned.

She stood up and Carter looked down at her, frowning at her face. There were probably marks. “Thank you,” she said to him and then stepped to one side to look past his bulk at Nathaniel. “I know Margritte has a son in Oxenford. She said she was staying with him. But I really can’t imagine she would do anything like this and I’m deeply insulted by your suspicion. I’ve been away for the day and had no idea anything has happened to Will.”

She expected an apology but there was nothing of the sort on Nathaniel’s face. “I’ll go and look for him there then.”

“How can I help? Perhaps I could write to her and see if—”

“I think you’ve done enough, useless woman.” He gave her a look of absolute contempt. “If I find that you’re responsible for his being harmed I’ll personally—”

“May I suggest you leave, sir?” Carter shifted until he blocked the way between them again and Cathy heard Nathaniel leave the room, slamming the door behind him. Carter turned to face her again. “I’m so sorry, your Grace. Mr Reticulata-Iris is one of the individuals permitted to see you. Had I any idea he would be so…despicable I never would have let him enter.”

“It’s all right, you weren’t to know. Would you be so kind as to find out if Will came home after he met Margritte?”

“I’ll come straight back, your Grace.”

Trembling, Cathy opened and closed her mouth carefully, feeling the bruising again. She fumbled with the opening of her reticule and pulled out the small mirror compact inside and looked at her face, expecting to see marks, but there was only the usual red. Had they lied to her about the curse or had the third wish broken that one too? The ring still looked the same though, and the curse was bound into it.

Only an Iris man may touch you now…

The memory of Will's mother breaking the news to her returned with a sharp clarity. An Iris man—she had made out that it meant only Will, but what if it didn't? Her hand flew to her mouth as she realised why Vincent had been so keen to stay and take care of Sophia. He was her father. Will's mother had had an affair with her brother-in-law.

After a single knock the door opened and Carter returned. "Your Grace, the Duke hasn't yet returned and neither have his footmen. The Steward is going to the meeting place as I speak, a mundane hotel halfway between here and Oxford, to see if there is any evidence of foul play."

"Perhaps they just got talking and lost track of the time." She didn't believe it even as she said it. Something had happened to him; Nathaniel wouldn't have been sent by the Patroon unless they were sure. She could write to Margritte but what would it achieve? If she had done something terrible she was hardly likely to confess it to her victim's wife.

"I'm sure everything will be fine, your Grace."

It felt wrong to do anything but wait for word of Will's safety but Bennet wouldn't be distracted for much longer. Morgan arrived with her hat and gloves. "We have to go to the asylum," she said to Carter. "We've only got an hour or two at the most. We'll go through to the edge of Aquae Sulis, then you'll pick up a hire car for us in Bath, it's much closer to the asylum than London. You can drive, can't you Carter?"

"Yes, your Grace."

"What will happen afterwards?" Morgan asked as she put on her hat.

"Hopefully, I'll turn up with a bunch of people who'll need lots of tea," she replied.

"And what about Mr Bennet?" Carter asked.

She sighed. "I'll face that problem when I come to it."

Max waited at the edge of the park, watching the gates as the gargoyle hunkered down in the bushes. The Master of the London Camden Ward Chapter had a habit of taking a stroll and eating a chocolate bar there every day at 3 o'clock in the afternoon. It was overcast but not raining and the man's favourite bench was free.

Not wanting to look like an Arbiter waiting for someone to arrive, Max sat down on another bench with his back to the gates. The gargoyle had a clear view of them so it would know when the Chapter Master arrived, and meanwhile Max's face would be hidden. He checked his watch. Three o'clock.

He had a brief vision of the Chapter Master walking into the park behind him from the perspective of the bushes. He was a tall and rather gaunt man who didn't look in the best of health. There was a newspaper tucked under one arm, a take-away coffee cup in his left hand. He was dressed in a suit and wearing a heavy woollen coat with a thick woolly hat that had a large red bobble on the top. Max had a sense of the gargoyle finding it funny, but had no idea why.

Free of the pressure of fieldwork, Chapter Masters were able to live a relatively normal life, their souls intact and lifespan extended by living in the Nether. Many avoided entering Mundanus unless absolutely necessary, hoping to prolong their lives as much as possible, just like the puppets. Unlike them, Chapter Masters wanted longevity to protect the innocents. It seemed this one wasn't so keen on staying alive as long as possible.

The Chapter Master sat on his usual bench, rested the coffee on the wooden slat next to him and opened the newspaper. Max got up and approached slowly, expecting the man to look up, alert and ready to flee as soon as he detected him. But when the man's brown eyes peeped over the top of the paper he simply lowered it and smiled.

“You must be Max,” he said. “I’ve been waiting for you.”

“You’re the Chapter Master of the Camden Ward?” Max wanted to be certain before they spoke about anything sensitive.

“I am. My name is John. Come and sit down. And I feel I should say now, in case you had any concern, you’re not in any danger.”

Max sat next to him. “So you’ve decided I’m not a threat any more?”

“You misunderstand me. We haven’t tried to kill you. Whoever put you in hospital wasn’t one of mine.”

“Let’s go back to the beginning,” Max said. “Montgomery contacted me because he suspected your Chapter was corrupt. He was right.”

“Going right back to the beginning,” John echoed, “I instructed Monty to contact you.”

“You wanted me to find out.” Max nodded. “Yes, that makes sense. I wondered what could have motivated him to reveal it, when he didn’t feel any guilt. But if you sent Montgomery, why did Faulkner give me the brush-off?”

“Faulkner didn’t know what I’d done. I couldn’t risk anyone finding out, and that’s why I’m still alive today. Monty is dead.”

“Who killed him?”

“The same people who tried to kill you, I imagine. You’d left the hospital before my people had a chance to reach you, and then you were back in Wessex. There was nothing I could do without seriously rocking the boat.”

“Someone followed me and tried to finish the job.”

“Again, not one of mine.”

“But it was an Arbiter. Both times. And my Chapter was destroyed.”

John fiddled with the edge of the newspaper. “This is troubling news. I was depending on you to inform your Chapter Master, in the hope the

Sorcerer of Wessex would intervene. My orders to turn a blind eye to the activities of various families became unbearable when it was the turn of the Rosas. They took it too far."

"Is it the Irises now?" When John nodded, Max asked, "And there have been other families?"

"In the past I've been instructed to ignore the Wisterias, Peonias, Ranuculi, Digitalis and a few other very minor families. The Irises are the last ones—all of the puppets have had their turn over the years."

"But how could you sanction that?"

John was staring at one of the trees. "I haven't been happy about it. But I couldn't disobey a direct order from the Sorcerer. Surely you understand that?"

Max nodded. "Did you question it?"

"The first time, yes, I did. He told me there was a bigger picture and that whilst it seemed contrary to my remit, it was for the greater good. You said your Chapter was destroyed…is that why the Sorcerer of Wessex hasn't intervened? Because you haven't been able to get a message to him?"

"Mr Ekstrand knows," Max said. "But he's been distracted by the war with Mercia."

"War?" John appeared to know nothing about it.

"Ekstrand believes Rupert of Mercia killed all of the other Sorcerers. Have you been in contact with the Chapters in Sussex or East Anglia? How are you functioning without your Sorcerers?"

"I don't understand." John was even more pale now. "I received a message from Dante only this morning."

"But Dante died several weeks ago. I saw the body myself."

There was a long pause.

“Someone has been using a combination of Fae and sorcerous magic,” Max said. “My theory is that an apprentice of Dante’s is behind all of this. I don’t know how and I don’t know why. With your help I may be able to find some answers.” John was still staring at the tree. “I need you to open a Way to the Sorcerer’s house. I know you must have access for emergencies.”

John stood up. “I can’t help you.”

“But you know something is wrong. Innocents are being taken, Arbiters and Chapter staff are being murdered—the Master of my Chapter was murdered along with everyone else. The last two Sorcerers in Albion are trying to kill each other whilst the true perpetrator goes free. If you don’t help me, you’re only going to put more people at risk.”

John shook his head. “I’m sorry.”

“You wanted this to be discovered. Now I’m here and willing to do something, are you really going to turn me away and let this continue?”

“Yes. I am.”

Sam felt like he’d been walking for days. The mists of the Nether made it hard to mark his progress. There were no landmarks and no points of reference against which he could measure the distance travelled. He looked back at one point, seeing the iron path twisting in a huge corkscrew shape that made his heart flap like a dying fish. He only looked forwards from that point on.

He thought about the pillar he saw in Exilium on the day he tried to rescue the blondes. Poppy had been unable to look at it. Mazzi had told him that the anchors that hold the Worlds apart were made from iron and copper, as this path was. He was certain it had something to do with marking its

edges—that's what he'd been looking for when he stumbled upon the pillar the first time. He was walking the chains between the Worlds. He smiled. That sounded pretty cool.

He wanted to understand more but Amir hadn't left anything for him to read about the esoteric aspects of his new position. It was all business. Mazzi said that each Lord and Lady of the Elemental Court was different, bringing something new to the role each time. He was probably the first one who'd had a previous run-in with one of the Fae Lords. Hopefully, he was about to become the first to bitch-slap one too.

Sam tried to focus on reaching the end of the path, just as he had focused on finding the edge of Exilium, but it seemed to have no effect. Then he realised the same rules wouldn't apply in the Nether. There was nothing to do but walk and not think about the fact that he was probably walking upside down at points on the corkscrew path without even realising it.

Just as he was wondering whether it actually led anywhere, Sam looked up from his feet to see that the path ran into a thick bank of fog. Hoping it was the boundary between the Nether and the edge of Exilium, Sam quickened his pace until he reached the point where the iron disappeared into the mists. He remembered the pillar stretching out of the ground in Exilium, so he got down on his hands and knees, expecting another stomach-churning sensation as he crossed the boundary.

His instinct was correct and, as he passed from the misty void into the Fae prison, his weight tipped back and he grasped the pillar, wrapping his legs around it like a child trying to shimmy up a tree trunk. He squeezed his eyes shut as he inched forwards until his body readjusted.

When he opened them again he wasn't in the Nether any more, but he wasn't convinced he was in Exilium yet either. There were trees and

meadows, a blue sky and fluffy clouds but it could have been a spot in the English countryside. It wasn't as breathtaking; the colours were just normal —pleasant—but not supernaturally beautiful.

He was about a metre off the ground and beginning to slide towards it, so he let go of the pillar and stood on the grass. It looked like it was the same pillar he'd seen before and was incredibly cold to the touch. Scanning the horizon, Sam couldn't see any clusters of trees to suggest Lord Poppy's or anyone else's domain, nor any of the tell-tale flowers. He did see lots of tiny things in the air, seeming to be fleeing from where he was. Or were they fleeing from *him*?

Sam started to walk, holding at the centre of his thoughts the desire to see the enslaved blondes he couldn't save before. He would find them, he would free them, that was all he wanted to do. After a while he wondered why the ground was still flat. All the other times he'd looked for people the meadow would rise into a gentle hill, then the person he was hoping to find would be on the other side. Nothing like that seemed to be happening. Maybe he was just in the middle of the Sussex Downs and not in Exilium at all.

Then he saw someone walking towards him, someone tall enough to be Fae, wearing a long cloak. Sam stopped and waited until he got closer. He looked behind him to make sure no one was creeping up on him whilst he was distracted and saw a couple of tiny flowers he'd brushed as he went past, now brown and shrivelled. He faced front again. He was in Exilium, he was certain now, but he wasn't the same man he was before.

The Fae had green eyes in contrast to the solid black Sam was used to in Poppy. He was covered in thousands of oak leaves, woven into a cloak and wrapped around him from neck to floor, trailing after him and spilling

around his feet as he walked. There was a circlet of oak leaves too and Sam wondered if he was some sort of royalty.

The Fae stopped a few metres away, further than one would normally when speaking to another person. He bowed, very deeply. “Lord Iron, Master of the blood and star metal, protector of the innocent, brother to the binding metal and friend to the Sorcerers, as Prince of the realm it is my honour to welcome you to Exilium.”

Sam rubbed the back of his neck, feeling like an impostor. “Right. Thanks.” After a beat he returned the bow, as embarrassed and hesitant as the Prince’s was elegant.

“May I ask why you have chosen to grace us with your visit?”

“I want to speak to Poppy.”

“I will see that he is brought to you immediately.” The Prince pulled one of the leaves from his cloak and blew it off the palm of his hand. It fluttered away and was swiftly out of sight. “Has he caused offence?”

“Oh, yes,” said Sam, nodding. “I’m going to give him the chance to put it right.”

“That is most generous of you. I’m sorry we have to wait. I’m sure you understand it isn’t possible to bring him so close to your presence in the usual way.”

Sam nodded, even though he didn’t understand, being ignorant of how the usual way worked.

The Prince stared at him but remained silent. Sam was about to ask how long it would take when he saw Poppy hurrying towards them.

“Your Royal Highness,” he said when he reached them, bowing so low his black hair brushed the blades of grass. He looked at Sam, his expression mutating into one of absolute horror. “…Lord…Iron?”

“Lord Iron wishes to speak with you,” the Prince said and then turned to Sam. “I will be close by, should you need anything else.”

Sam thanked him and then looked at Poppy. The Fae was leaning back, as if trying to stay as far away from him as possible without looking like he was trying to do so. “I’ve come to put things right.”

“Oh, of course.” Poppy smiled and clicked his fingers. The faerie appeared behind him, peeping from behind his shoulder. It managed one look in Sam’s direction before squealing and diving out of sight. “The hourglass!” Poppy hissed at it as the Prince backed off, still watching.

The faerie fluttered to a spot on the grass further behind Poppy and gave Sam another nervous look before waving its tiny hands to make the dreaded hourglass appear. The pile of sand in the bottom half of the glass was so small it was noticeable by its sparkling rather than its size.

Poppy hurried over and tapped the top three times. The sand poured into the bottom half so fast it had all run through by the time Poppy straightened up again. He grinned and held it out towards Sam. “Ah, it seems there was a little blockage at the neck. Oh, look! Now I’ve cleared it, it seems the debt has been paid already. How quickly those minutes seemed to pass!”

“That’s a start. Where are they?”

“Who?”

“The slaves, the ones I tried to save. I want you to bring them here.”

“Oh, *those* slaves!” He tittered. “I’ve grown so tired of them. I don’t suppose you’d like to take them off my hands? I’d be so delighted if you could.”

“Stop stalling.”

Poppy twisted to look for the faerie. It had gathered a clump of grass together to hide behind. “See to it!” He smiled at Sam again. “It seems you’ve…risen in the Worlds. Of course, I always suspected there was

something special about you. My favourite wouldn't care about just any mundane."

"Bullshit," Sam said. "You had no idea and don't try to say otherwise."

Poppy's laugh was weak and unconvincing. He flung the hourglass up into the air and it turned into a cluster of poppy petals that settled at his feet. He twisted his cane and attempted another smile. "Not long now."

The slaves soon came into sight and Sam went towards them, closing the distance as fast as he could. They were dressed in poppy petals clinging to their bodies, leaving no curve undescribed. They looked healthier than the last time he saw them, but far from happy.

"I really am going to rescue you this time," he said to them, but none of them looked convinced.

He knelt in front of Clare and pulled at a poppy petal clinging to her ankle, covering the sparkling band he knew was there. As soon as his fingers touched the petal's softness all of the others fell. It revealed the band marking her slavery, but also every other inch of her body. Sam kept his eyes fixed on her ankle, muttering an apology, but she seemed unconcerned. None of the others seemed to react either. Perhaps they were too beautiful to be bashful.

He worked the fingers of both hands under the band and it lost its diamond sheen. When he pulled outwards it snapped like it was made of baked clay. Clare shuddered, took a deep breath and looked around her as if she'd just woken up. Then she blushed and accepted the blacksmith's apron Sam offered, giving him a grateful smile. Sam didn't have enough items of clothing for all of them, so he called to the Prince and asked for something to protect their modesty before he broke the spell on them too. He didn't want anything belonging to Poppy to touch them again.

Soon they were all free and wrapped in green blankets made of the softest moss imaginable. Sam faced Poppy again. “Why couldn’t they eat or drink in Mundanus before?”

Poppy twisted the cane as if he were trying to screw it into wood. “Well…I suppose there could have been a teeny tiny curse put on them—I hear it happens to mortals when they visit here. But now you’ve touched them they’ll be free to eat and drink whatever horrors are in Mundanus.”

Sam grinned at Clare as they all thanked him. She went to embrace him but he stepped back. “Let’s wait until you’re not wearing a magic blanket, eh?” He called the Prince over again. “Could you get them all back home in Mundanus and guarantee that no one does anything to them on the way?”

“It would be my pleasure,” the Prince said. “They will be given into the care of one of the most trustworthy mortals I know, and conveyed to wherever they wish in Mundanus without any Charms cast upon them.”

“Because I’ll hear of it, if anything does happen to them.”

“You have my word that it will be done as you wish.”

Poppy was watching the Prince’s deference with great interest, but said nothing. Sam told the group to make sure they had each other’s contact details before they parted ways and that he’d be in touch as soon as he was home. No doubt his army of staff would be able to track Clare down and from her he could find the others. “Don’t mention me to anyone,” he added.

The Prince led them away and Sam breathed in deeply, newly aware—by virtue of its absence—of the weight he’d been carrying since he’d failed to rescue them the first time. Not only were they going to be reunited with their families, he was never going to be summoned and messed about by Poppy again. He was no longer afraid.

“Well, if that’s everything…” Poppy took a step away.

“There’s just one more thing, Poppy,” Sam said, enjoying the fear that crossed the Fae’s face in response.

Poppy clasped his hands together, dropping the cane as his face twisted with anguish. “I had no idea what she would wish for, truly—how could I? And I did all I could to divert her energies. I told her to paint! It isn’t my fault the wish will come true now!”

Sam frowned. “You’re talking about Cathy?”

“Yes, my favourite! I had no idea what potential lay beneath the damage and layers of insecurities and self-doubt and misery caused by her—” he stopped. “That is what you meant by ‘one more thing’, isn’t it?”

“What will happen now the wish is going to come true?” When Poppy hesitated Sam took a step towards him.

Poppy shrank back. “She’ll destroy everything!”

“She made a wish to do that?”

“She wished to reach her true potential and that’s what it is! But don’t tell anyone, especially her husband! He’ll only tell—” he lowered his voice to a whisper “—her new patron, and he wouldn’t have to wait for their child, he’d be able to take what he needs from *her*. He knows what potential she has, but he doesn’t think her capable of bringing it to fruition. But I’ve made that possible.” He covered his mouth with his hands and spoke through his fingers. “It’s exquisitely terrifying. I haven’t been so excited in such a long time.”

“Is she in any danger?”

“No, she made a very clever wish. It really wasn’t my fault.”

Sam decided he would ask Cathy; he was planning to see her anyway. “The last thing I want from you is the memory you took from me the first time I came here.”

“That little thing?” Poppy pulled his cane from the ground and took another step back. The faerie, which had been hidden behind him, zinged off into the distance. “It’s not worth your trouble to—”

“Poppy, give it back to me, or I’ll take it from you.”

“I have no idea how to give it back to you, now that you break—”

Sam launched himself at Poppy’s throat, unable to stomach being messed about a moment longer. They both crashed to the ground, Poppy screeching for help and flailing ineffectually as the urge to push Sam away warred with the one to avoid any contact.

Sam could feel the skin of Poppy’s neck beneath his hands. It was cold and didn’t feel like the throat of a man, being disturbingly free of the feel of an Adam’s apple and muscles beneath the skin. Instead, it felt more like holding a pillow stuffed full of down; too soft and with too much give. He could crush it, he realised, but wasn’t convinced it would choke the Fae like it would choke a man.

“Give it back to me, or I’ll drag you to the Prince and tell him you’ve been uncooperative.”

“You’re burning me!” Poppy wailed and then coughed so hard his entire body shook.

A wisp of smoke with hints of gold and green in its tendrils escaped with the next cough and before he could move away, Sam breathed it in. Appalled by the thought of it, he released Poppy’s neck and clambered off him, leaving the Fae to moan quietly.

Then he was with Leanne, laughing so hard they were holding each other up as Pete kept asking what a douchebag was, over and over again. They were drunk but not too much, and Leanne’s hair was flowing back in the breeze.

Then Sam was on his knees in Exilium, and he drew in a harsh breath to stop the grief from flooding out of him. Poppy hadn't just taken a memory of a perfect afternoon, he'd stolen the meaning of the photo in the hall of their house, the reminder to fight for the marriage even when Leanne was moving on.

But he couldn't let it overwhelm him then and there. Sam forced himself onto his feet and went back to where Poppy lay with his fingers gingerly exploring the skin on his neck. "If you ever come near me again, or try to fuck up my life ever again, I'll make a cage of the purest iron and lock you in it and then…I'll eat the key. The same goes for Cathy. Don't you ever do anything to her again. Understand?"

"She isn't mine any more," Poppy whispered. "You're threatening the wrong Lord." When Sam leaned towards him, he whimpered. "But I do understand your desire."

Sam walked away, free of the Fae yet burdened by grief. He had to see Cathy safe before he could rest. He couldn't save his wife but he could save his friend and that would have to be enough.

24

Max and the gargoyle looked down at the Chapter Master's body, watching the thin trickle of blood run from the wound on the back of his head. They were in his office, having followed him back into the Nether from the mundane park. Max didn't realise the gargoyle would hit him that hard.

"Is he dead?" the gargoyle asked.

Max felt for a pulse, found it. "No."

The gargoyle's shoulders dropped a couple of inches. "We've crossed a line, haven't we?"

Max nodded. "Now we're here, we need to make it count for something. Every Master has a means to get to their Sorcerer's house in the case of an emergency. We need to find it."

"Will it be an Opener?"

"Probably," Max replied. He wasn't sure how else a Way could be opened by anyone other than a Sorcerer, using legal magic at least.

They both began to rifle through drawers in the desk and then in the cabinets behind them. It was a modest office, decorated with a few paintings of seascapes. The desk was free of personal effects. A tidy man.

"Nothing." The gargoyle abandoned searching the drawers and instead began to sniff about the room. It lifted the corner of the rug with a claw, then pulled the whole thing aside with an excited flourish, revealing nothing but floorboards. With a disappointed snort it moved back towards the desk as Max completed his search of the last filing cabinet.

“It might be something hidden in one of the walls, or even the door.” Max checked the doorknob but it was only what it appeared to be. There was nothing but wall behind the paintings and thick curtains.

“Hang on,” the gargoyle said. It was sniffing the desk.

“I checked the drawers,” Max said.

“Did you check the hidden one?”

The gargoyle reached underneath and there was a quiet click. The top centre panel of the desk slid back, explaining why the desk was so free of the usual objects people filled them with.

“Rookie error.” The gargoyle grinned at him. “Fancy missing the old hidden-desk-compartment trick.”

Max ignored the teasing and reached inside, closing his fingers around a standard doorknob-shaped Opener. It had the usual pin that would be easy to stick into any surface and enough formulae to convince him it was the one they were looking for.

He went to the wall next to the window and lined the pin up ready to push in. “Ready?”

The gargoyle came to his side. “Wait a sec. What if we go through and the evil apprentice is there, ready to kill us?”

“If it is one of Dante’s apprentices, he’ll think only the Chapter Master can come through this way, and he wouldn’t without sending word ahead. He’ll be caught off guard.”

“So I just go for him, knock him out and we drag him to Ekstrand? No, hang on, that won’t work, will it?”

Max shook his head. “No. If he’s involved in something as dodgy as all this, he’ll be protected. Most Sorcerers are anyway. The best scenario is that we get into his house and find some evidence to prove to Ekstrand that the Sorcerer of Mercia is innocent. If the apprentice is there, we should leave

straightaway and get Ekstrand." He paused. "Maybe we should just do that anyway."

"No way!" the gargoyle said. "First, we'd have to explain how we got this Opener and second, there's no guarantee he'd do anything. I mean, he doubted us before, what's to say he wouldn't do it again? And anyway, it's Sunday, and he's batshit on Sundays. Well, more batshit than usual. We've got to do this now."

"Will a few days make a difference?"

"They could to the Sorcerer of Mercia! Hell, if we wait, Mercia might kill Ekstrand before he's useful again."

Max nodded and pushed the pin into the wall. He twisted the doorknob and the burning outline appeared of a Way being created.

"I'm scared," the gargoyle whispered as the door appeared.

"It won't serve us now," Max replied. "Focus on the goal."

He opened the door and a large hallway stretched ahead of them, containing an impressive staircase that split into two smaller ones halfway up to reach the upper floors. It looked like a wing of the house stretched to either side. It was a substantial property and far more extravagant than Ekstrand's Georgian mansion.

Max pulled out the Opener, let the gargoyle go through and then went through himself, keeping the Opener in his hand in case they needed to leave in a hurry. He waited a moment, expecting an assistant or butler to challenge them, but no one came. He turned to see a normal front door now the Way had gone.

The gargoyle was sniffing again. "No one's been here for a long time," it said. "The air is too stale."

"I doubt there have been any visitors since whatever happened to Dante happened," Max said. "Let's see if we can find a part of the house that's still

in use.”

“Maybe the dodgy apprentice doesn’t live here any more.” The gargoyle sounded hopeful.

They took a wing each, only Max’s shoes making a gentle clicking sound. The house was silent enough to suggest it was empty and they tried each door on the ground floor of both wings in turn. All were locked. The marble tiles were dulled by dust and, the further they went from the large windows in the central hallway, the darker it got. There were candles in the chandeliers, but they too were dusty.

Max went back to the staircase and the gargoyle reported the same as he had seen. They climbed the stairs together, the gargoyle’s ears twitching.

They split up again to search the upper floor of the two wings. Again, locked doors and dust. They regrouped and went back downstairs, Max keen to find the kitchen and see if there was any sign of servants. There was none.

“Bugger,” the gargoyle said as they went back to the entrance hall. “Of course this dodgy apprentice wouldn’t stay here, not when he could be found by the Chapter Master. This is all a bloody waste of time. I gave that bloke a concussion for nothing.”

They stood at the bottom of the staircase. Max wondered if it was safe to use his own Opener to go straight from the house to Aquae Sulis. If the culprit returned, would he be able to trace their destination? He wasn’t sure if it left a residue. He looked up the staircase and saw a large window they’d passed without even looking outside. It was a habit of living in the Nether; one got used to there being nothing to look out at. “There may be outbuildings,” he said. “I’ll go and—”

The gargoyle was already bounding up the stairs. “There’s a great big bloody tower!” It pointed out of the window with a claw. “And there’s a

light on at the top!”

Max didn’t need to look out of the window to see the tower, seeing it through the gargoyle's gaze. It looked like a turret of a castle but was unattached to any other building or curtain wall. It was close enough to walk to without risking getting lost in the mists.

“This house must have been where the apprentices lived and had their lessons, and where Dante met with the Chapter Master,” he theorised. “That tower might be his private residence.”

“Do you think the other apprentices are dead?” The gargoyle was peeping over the sill more cautiously.

“Probably.”

“Are we going to risk going to the tower?”

“Yes,” Max replied. There was a direction they could approach from without being overlooked from one of the tower windows.

“But won’t it be warded to hell and locked and really dangerous?”

“Probably.”

The gargoyle padded down the stairs. “If I could, I’d be shitting pebbles.”

“Let’s go now, it won’t get any less risky.”

They broke out of the locked house and made their way to the tower, taking care to keep out of the line of sight of any of the arrow-slit windows on the top floor. It was four storeys high and the top floor’s narrow windows glowed with a pale light. It had a larger diameter than the average castle tower and Max wondered where its anchor was.

“I’ll try the door,” the gargoyle volunteered as they reached it. “You know, in case it’s designed to burn people who aren’t evil.”

“I’m not certain that would be one of the criteria written into the formulae,” Max said but let the gargoyle do as it had offered.

The door opened inwards. “Well, blow me down,” the gargoyle said. “It’s not even locked.”

“All the people who knew it’s here are probably dead,” Max said. “After you.”

The gargoyle went inside, paused to see if it collapsed into dust or spontaneously combusted, and, when neither happened, beckoned Max onwards. Max pulled out his penlight torch and switched it on. There was a staircase curving upwards and one that went down.

“Wait here,” the gargoyle whispered. It took the torch and went downstairs.

Max saw an image of a small kitchen, untidy and recently used. The gargoyle sniffed at a small puddle of milk on the table. It was fresh. No one else was there. Dante’s murderer was satisfied with fending for himself, it seemed.

Once the gargoyle was back with him, Max hooked his walking stick over his arm and climbed the stone steps until he reached a wooden door into the room on the next floor. It too was unlocked and there was a lantern hanging from a hook just inside the door. After a brief sweep over the room with the torch to check it really was empty, Max took a moment to light the candle inside.

The room contained a couple of armchairs, a single bookcase crafted to fit the curve of the wall, and a fireplace. There was a table, again curved, upon which were piled all manner of artefacts. Max recognised Peepers and Sniffers from his own Chapter, presumably looted from the cloister. They looked the same as the ones in his pockets and—something he hadn’t appreciated before—distinct in design from others on the table. They had the same function, but side by side it was clear that each Sorcerer had his own design.

There were several items the likes of which he'd never seen before, things he assumed weren't tools used by Arbiters but personal artefacts made by and for the Sorcerers themselves. Max took care not to touch them; that lesson had been burned in deep by his training. One Opener had several interlocking circles embedded in the doorknob and upon inspection Max found they could be moved to spell out the principle cities of the Heptarchy: Bath, London, Oxford, York, Norwich, Colchester, Winchester and Canterbury. He'd only ever used an Opener that was keyed for a specific location, or could open a Way into the Nether version of the anchor property he was already at; not one that could open Ways to multiple locations. Useful. He wondered which Sorcerer it had belonged to.

"We shouldn't get distracted," the gargoyle said.

It climbed the next section of the stone staircase a few steps ahead of him, paused to listen at the next door and then looked through a keyhole. The room beyond was empty, so it opened the door and they crept inside.

The first thing Max noticed was the lack of any more steps. He looked at the ceiling, searching for a trapdoor and signs of a ladder, but there were neither, only thick wooden boards. Even though the floor above appeared to be lit and presumably occupied, there were no sounds of anyone's footsteps, not even a creak. There was a lantern but he didn't want to light it when they were so close to the room above.

"Shine the torch down again," the gargoyle whispered and Max did so.

The circle of light picked out a wardrobe, a washstand, a mirror and a bed. On top of the bed's rumpled sheets were several items of clothing.

Women's clothing.

Max saw a bra, petticoat, skirt and blouse. He swept the room for any sign of male clothing but there was none. The gargoyle went silently to the

wardrobe and opened it slowly, lest its door creak. Only women's clothing hung inside.

"I don't understand," he said as the gargoyle closed the wardrobe again. "How could a woman be behind this?"

It was one of the fundamental rules of the sorcerous arts: never teach a woman the secrets of sorcery. He recalled people at the Cloister speculating about the reasons why, and the confusion caused by the fact Ekstrand had a female librarian. The distrust, the refusal to contemplate a woman being a Sorcerer—or an Arbiter for that matter—was universally accepted in his world and yet they were some of the best researchers he'd worked with.

"Perhaps Dante fell in love," the gargoyle suggested. "With the wrong kind of woman."

Max tried to reconcile what he knew. The perpetrator was a master of sorcery and Fae magic and female. Was she Fae-touched? It would explain how she knew of Lady Rose and how she would have the means to contact her and make the deal Thorn had told him about. Had one of them managed to infiltrate Dante's household? It would explain the corruption—but then surely they would have engineered the protection of only their own family from the Arbiters in London, not many families over the years. Why favour the Irises now?

"There's something over here." The gargoyle was on the far side of the room and Max sought it out with the torchlight. It was standing beside a painting, one of a man and a woman sitting close together, looking at each other lovingly. Max recognised the man from the body he saw after the Moot: Dante. The woman had the same colour hair and too similar a mouth for her to be anything but his sister. They appeared to be very close in age.

The frame had something embedded in the centre below the painting and Max went closer to inspect it. A small dome of glass enclosed two locks

of hair twisted around each other. He went to the bed and scoured the pillows until he found a long strand the same dark blond as the subjects of the painting. He didn't need to hold the strand next to the locks to see they were the same.

"Dante's sister," he said, and then gave the torch to the gargoyle to hold whilst he put the strand in an evidence bag pulled from his pocket and then tucked both away.

"She murdered her own brother?"

"Perhaps. Or perhaps he died of natural causes."

"And she preserved his body for later use?" The gargoyle shook its head. "No way."

Max gave the room another sweep with the torchlight but still couldn't find any way out other than the staircase they'd climbed up.

"So…" The gargoyle came to his side. "Now we know who's been causing all the trouble, we can report back to Ekstrand, right?"

"Wrong," Max replied, examining the ceiling again. "We know who but we don't know why."

"That's obvious: to be the last Sorcerer."

"But why?"

"To be the most powerful."

"But what for?"

"Umm…isn't that enough?"

Max looked at the gargoyle, giving up on finding a secret ceiling hatch. "People want power for a reason. What does she want to do with it? What's the point of being the only Sorcerer unless you want to do something that the other Sorcerers would prevent?"

"Isn't being a female Sorcerer exactly that? If they found out about her, they'd kill her. There you go: perfect motive. Now let's get out of here."

“Not until I know what’s going on up there.”

The gargoyle’s eyes followed Max’s finger upwards. “Bollocks.”

“There has to be a way to get to that floor. Have a look around.”

As the gargoyle sniffed, Max looked at the painting again, examining the details of their clothing and the room in the background. It looked like it had been painted a long time ago, but he couldn’t put a date to it, not being an expert on such things.

“Look, even if we do find a way up there,” the gargoyle whispered in his ear, “look at the size of this place. No way we can walk in without being seen or heard.”

“I’d rather peep than walk in,” Max said. “I just need something to use the Peeper on.”

“I reckon it’s that.” The gargoyle jabbed a claw at the painting and Max nodded.

Carefully he swung the frame to one side and then the other. The wall was intact behind it. He ran his fingers around its edge, feeling for a button or depression of some kind that could trigger something. He found nothing and took a step back, shaking his head.

The gargoyle went close up to it, sniffing it like a dog would a table of food, and then pressed the dome containing the locks of hair.

The painting, and the entire section of wall it hung upon, shimmered and, before Max realised what was happening, he and the gargoyle were looking through a Way into another circular room. Dante’s sister was standing in front of a huge pane of glass, thankfully with her back to them.

She didn’t react, absorbed in painting something onto the glass which seemed to be scrolling sideways by arcane means. She didn’t have to move as she painted on symbols and strings of formulae; they just appeared to float away to her left, as if the glass itself was a moving portal onto another

surface. She was wearing a loose white dress and was barefoot, her dark blond hair so long it reached the floor.

The scent of flowers tickled Max's nose. It was such an intense mixture he couldn't single out one in particular.

Either side of her, two large lenses were held in ornate brass stands and seemed to be focusing light reflecting from the pane of glass to such an intensity that Max could see the light passing through them, creating the pale glow they'd seen from outside the tower. Each of the focused beams was striking the back of what looked like some sort of scrying glass, also held in their own frames a few feet above the ground. Each scrying glass then had a modern digital camera on a tripod pointed at it, and, judging from the small viewscreen on each one, they were filming what was being displayed on the scrying glasses.

At first Max thought the scrying glasses were simply displaying a copy of what she was painting onto the glass, but then he realised the background was different in each one.

The mirror on the left showed the outside of Ekstrand's anchor property in Bath, while the one on the right showed the exterior of the Bodleian Library in Oxford, the Sorcerer of Mercia's anchor property. In both images, the formulae were appearing on the walls of the buildings, a couple of feet above the ground, just for a second or so before fading from sight.

Another movement in the one displaying the Bodleian quadrangle made him focus on it. A man in a black coat and black bowler hat had noticed something happening to the wall. An Arbiter. He pulled out a mobile phone, pressed a button and then dropped dead, in the way Max imagined his colleagues had when the Chapter was attacked and the soul jars destroyed.

It was all Max had a chance to take in before the gargoyle yanked him away. The Way closed again but the gargoyle didn't let go of Max's arm,

pulling him to the steps and not letting go until they were in the room below.

Max leaned against the wall, waiting for the residual panic to pass that had leached through from the contact with the gargoyle. The gargoyle was still caught up in it, grasping the sides of its head and pacing up and down silently, thanks to the formulae in its bracers.

“She’s going to kill them!”

“I know.” Max got his Opener out of his pocket and then went to the table to find the other one he’d spotted before.

“Oh, shit, this is terrible! She killed that Arbiter—the whole Chapter’s probably gone down! She’s turning their hearts into stone, isn’t she?”

“The spell was moving where she painted from left to right, which suggests it’s either a very long thing to write or it needs to surround the entire building,” Max said, his fingers hovering for a second above the strange Opener as he battled with his training to overcome the urge to leave it where it lay. “Ekstrand and Mercia may still be alive if the spell requires completion of the formulae.”

“So you want us to go back up there and…what? Rugby tackle her?”

“No, she’ll be protected.” Max knew they wouldn’t have a hope; he could still remember his mentor’s response when he’d asked what could be done if a Sorcerer needed to be stopped. “You find another Sorcerer and tell him the problem,” he’d said. “You think Sorcerers would let us exist if we could be a threat?”

Dante’s sister knew both Fae and sorcerous magic and she’d be able to destroy the soul chain with little effort if the gargoyle went for her, meaning the end for both of them. If he went in alone there were a hundred ways she could kill him if he managed to get close to her. Even if he managed to

secure a gun in time, she'd no doubt be warded against projectiles and similar forms of attack.

"I'll use my Opener to get back to Mr Ekstrand's house and get everyone out before the formulae are completed. This Opener looks like it can get into Oxford." Max picked it up and showed it to the gargoyle. "The Bodleian Library quadrangle is in the centre of the city, it's likely to open a way near there. You go and find the Oxford Arbiter's body. He'll have a means to go back to his Cloister—use it to get to the Sorcerer of Mercia—"

"No." The gargoyle snatched Max's Opener from his hand. "No way you're going to Ekstrand, flesh-boy, your heart will be turned to stone. Only I can go through."

"But there's only one of you. There's not enough time. One of them will die."

The gargoyle nodded. "I know. So which one are we going to save?"

25

Margritte stood outside the large black box, twisting the key Rupert had given her. It looked bizarre beneath the beautiful vaulted ceiling of the Divinity Schools. There was no door, neither were there windows. He'd said it wouldn't run out of air inside, that he'd thought of that. As long as they fed and watered him, he'd said, William Iris would last as long as they wanted.

As long as they wanted. She shivered, finding such power over a man's life unpalatable. Across the city three families had been taken from their homes and put into custody, just because they were Irises. They had children. They were probably terrified.

She'd made it all happen. At the beginning it had all made sense, but now it felt like some terrible accident unfolding around her.

"Do you want me to go in there with you, Maggie?" Rupert called from the doorway to Convocation House. "I already sent an Arbiter in there, he can't hurt you."

"No," she said. "I just need a minute."

He lingered, watching her hesitation, and it made her feel more flustered. It was too late now. She couldn't tell him to send William back home and carry on as if nothing had happened. She pressed the key against the black glass and it sank in, a keyhole forming around it. She opened the door that appeared moments later, keeping the key in the palm of her hand in case she needed to get out again quickly. If she turned it to the right once she was inside it would let her back into the larger room she was in now. If

she turned it to the left, it would open a Way to her room at Lincoln. She had the feeling he was trying to be thoughtful, in his own strange way. She just hoped he hadn't made another to take him directly to her room whenever he wanted.

The light that spilled in from the new doorway was the only light in the box. It was the size of a very small room and the air smelt stale and laced with sweat.

William was sitting on a chair next to a small table. His lip and right eye were swollen and it looked like his hands were tied behind his back. There was an empty chair across from him.

"Light," she said and, as Rupert had promised, the ceiling shone, bathing the interior in a blue-white glow. She let the door close behind her and, as expected, its outline disappeared until there was a smooth surface once more.

William stared at her as she approached the empty chair. "You'll forgive me if I don't stand for you," he said. "I'm unable to."

She suppressed the urge to apologise or show any of her doubts. He would exploit any weakness. "It's within your power to improve your circumstances," she said as she sat opposite him.

"What have you done, Margritte? How did you persuade a Sorcerer to do this?"

"I simply told him the truth."

"Whose truth?"

"He knows you're in league with the Sorcerer of Wessex, he knows about Lord Iris' plan and your part in it. Of course he got involved."

"I have no idea what you're talking about but I do know what the ramifications of this will be, and none of them bodes well for you."

“You’re the one in the worse position here, William. Your threats lose their power when you’re just a boy in a box.”

“My family will—”

“I don’t want to talk about your family, I want to talk about what you need to do to get out. I’m sure you’re keen for that to happen.”

“I want to know one thing first. Did Cathy know what you planned to do?”

She considered lying to him, the angry, shadowy part of herself hoping it would fill him with despair to think he couldn’t even trust his own wife. But she couldn’t do that to Catherine, not now she knew how she felt about the cause. She couldn’t destroy any more lives. “No,” she said.

“So you exploited her better nature and betrayed her trust. I thought more of you.”

Margritte curled her toes inside her shoes, focusing her anger into the movement to keep it from her face. It hurt because he was right. “You know my husband didn’t try to kill her. All I want is for you to clear his name in front of the Court. It’s not too much to ask. I shouldn’t even have to, in fact. If you were as decent as Catherine seems to have deluded herself into believing, you would have done so already.”

William’s laugh was bitter. “You want me to clear your family’s name when you’ve sunk to this? Kidnapping a Duke, destroying his possessions —including his wedding ring—locking him in a box with no food, no water for God knows how long, beating him, tying him to a chair? Do you even know where the moral high ground is any more?”

Margritte took a moment to breathe in as a burst of panic threatened to take her. “If you don’t do this, I will invite the Patroons to Oxenford and cast a Truth Charm on you in their presence. You will be forced to confess __”

“They wouldn’t come!” William laughed again. “You did all this to threaten me with that? What fantasy world do you live in? If they answered your demand they would be sanctioning this barbaric behaviour. The Patroons would close rank and force you to release me.”

She stood, trying to think of something to say, something to frighten him, but she was too afraid herself. So she turned her back, thrust the key into the wall and went back out into the larger room, controlling herself until the door closed behind her.

Margritte went to one of the long wooden benches and sat, wondering if she was actually going to be sick. She slid the key up her sleeve, freeing her hands so she could weep into them. She should have gone abroad until the madness of her grief had passed. Instead she’d sucked Rupert into the maelstrom with her, and the entire city. All of her suspicions about Ekstrand and Iris were only that; there was no proof.

“Maggie?”

Her spirits sank further as she heard Rupert coming towards her. She hurriedly wiped away the tears.

“What did he say?” His hand was on her shoulder. Really, the man was insufferable!

“Nothing.” She stood to break the contact but he was boxing her in against the bench. “I…it’s harder than I thought it would be.”

He nodded. “I thought so. You knew him before. That’s bound to make it tough.”

She had to find a way to untangle the mess she’d made without making Rupert angry. He could destroy them all, including her son. “Perhaps we need to take a different approach.”

He nodded. “I couldn’t agree more.”

Rupert went towards the box, flicked his yo-yo at one of the sides and a door opened again. She hurried after him, fearful.

“Morning.”

William watched him warily, the cockiness gone. Rupert was trying to make him feel disoriented; it was evening in Oxford.

“Good morning.”

“So, I take it Margritte has explained what she wants from you?”

William nodded slowly. His lip had split and Margritte tried not to look at it. Rupert hadn’t mentioned any violence. Had he provoked the Arbiter? Were they trying to frighten him?

“I refuse. This is no way to treat a Duke. I won’t be coerced into anything.”

“But that’s what happens to you all the time, isn’t it?” Rupert turned the chair around and straddled it, resting his arms on the back. “Your Patroons and patrons tell you what to do all the fucking time. Shit, I really hope you were coerced into killing Bartholomew, for your sake. Otherwise you wanted to kill him to take the throne. You don’t want me to think that’s true, do you?”

“I have no interest in what you think I may or may not have done. It’s none of your business.”

Rupert chuckled and fired a grin at Margritte who had retreated to a corner after the door closed behind her. “I like him. Cool under pressure, like all of the Irises. And—” he turned back to face William “—like all of the Irises in Oxenford, you’re also in a box of my making. Now listen to me, Dukey-boy, there are two ways we can do this. One is like gentlemen, I’ll even put on a posh voice so you feel at home. We can have tea and crumpets, laugh about who’s just been rogered up the arse by who, and then you can sign a statement that clears Bartholomew’s name and read it out in

Convocation and in the Londinium Court. We could do that right now, and you'll be home in time for tea."

"No."

"All right, well, the second option is that I leave you in this box for a few days. I'll break up the sensory deprivation with periods of unpredictable loud noise that will only start when you fall asleep. After a week or so with no rest, no food, no fucking toilet, let's face it, you're going to be much more willing to meet Margritte's very reasonable request."

William looked at Margritte. "You want him to do this in your name?"

"I think I'm being one generous motherfucker." Rupert didn't let her reply. "I could torture you in ways your family haven't even discovered yet. And the longer you go on being an asshole about all this, the more likely that's going to happen."

"What have you offered him to make him do this?" William asked her and Rupert punched him so hard his chair fell back, taking William with it.

Rupert shoved the table to one side and grabbed William's lapels. "Listen to me, you misogynistic little shit. It may come as news to you but men can decide to help a woman because they think her argument is correct, not because she has different genitalia and has offered to do something with them. Don't insult my intelligence by making out that I'm incapable of making decisions without thinking about sex. That's fucking offensive, to me and to Margritte."

William coughed and blood splattered over Rupert's jumper. "There's more to this than Bartholomew."

"Yes, there is, but it isn't any promises of sex. Your patron is working with Ekstrand. I want you to tell me what he wants you to do and why."

There was a look of genuine confusion on William's face. "I have no idea why you think Ekstrand has anything to do with me."

“You helped him get the Master of Ceremonies back to Aquae Sulis.”

“I helped an Arbiter get into a party, that’s all. I made the people there think I did more to protect the identity of the person who really did help to rescue him. Now, will you please untie me or let me sit upright at least? I apologise for my remark, Margritte, but, for reasons I’m sure I don’t have to explain, I’m feeling rather bad-tempered.”

She waited for Rupert to meet with his request but he did nothing so she went behind William’s back and untied his hands. Rupert frowned as she did so, but said nothing.

“This has gone far enough,” she said, helping William to his feet. “Rupert, whilst I appreciate your sentiments, punching a man when you declare yourself to be above male stereotypes is hardly a way to prove the point.” She righted William’s chair and helped him to sit down. “I can’t bear this to go on a moment longer. I was…and still am devastated by what you did, William, but all I wanted was to correct the injustice committed against my husband. I’ve gone about it the wrong way. How can I watch you be beaten and terrorised into doing what I want in Bartholomew’s name? If he were to see me now and what damage I’ve wrought, he would be just as disgusted with me as I am of myself.”

“Maggie, he—”

She held up a hand. “I’m sorry, Rupert, but this has to stop and I have to apologise to the Irises. I take full responsibility for my actions.”

“So you’re going to let him go back and sit on Bartholomew’s throne and—”

“He sits on his own throne now. Nothing will bring Bartholomew back to me. I see no reason to carry on infecting everything and everyone around me with the madness of my grief.”

William reached out and rested a hand on her arm. “I beg your forgiveness, Madam. I know your husband was a decent man. I was led to believe he wasn’t and, like you, I acted swiftly in anger and filled with the desire to take revenge. I swear to you that I only discovered his innocence after the deed was done. It’s something I’ll regret for the rest of my life.”

Margritte’s legs wobbled beneath her, so she knelt on the floor in front of him, the black satin of her skirts disappearing against the black floor. “Who did it?”

“The Roses. When Thorn attacked Cathy he disguised himself to look like a minor Rosa, whom Cornelius White killed. He told me it was because he discovered he’d been hired by Bartholomew to kill Cathy. An Arbiter backed up the story and together I found their false evidence irrefutable. Lord Iris supported me but gave me no opportunity to calm down or uncover their lies. Once I learned of what they did, I killed Cornelius and banished Amelia to Mundanus. I’m so sorry.”

The hard stone of rage-filled grief that had sat in Margritte’s chest for so long burst and she couldn’t help but sob. Bartholomew had been nothing more than a cog in a political machine, one that was pulled out to make something else break. No wonder William hadn’t said anything; his own patron was part of the reason he’d rushed into challenging Bartholomew. Admitting he’d been tricked would reveal that Lord Iris had also been duped by the Roses—a family already broken—and William’s life would be forfeit. They were all victims, in their own way, and the thought fuelled her grief. What else could William have done, believing Bartholomew had attempted to kill his wife? She’d done the same as him: acted without knowing all the facts, driven by passion and rage.

“I accept your apology,” she said as the worst of the rush of emotion subsided. “And I offer you mine. I’ll see that this is put right and I’ll answer

for my rash act."

"Now just wait a bloody minute," Rupert said. "The Irises won't just accept an apology, they'll want blood!"

"So be it," she said. She wasn't afraid to admit she'd made a mistake.

"Don't give me that noble bullshit! And anyway, he's my prisoner and I'm not letting him go until I'm certain he's not—"

A Way opened behind William, making her jump to her feet in surprise, William too. The gargoyle that she'd seen in the film of the Moot leaped through, looking left and right with urgency as it took the room in. "I'm here to get you out!" it yelled.

"I don't need to be rescued," William said. "It's all—"

"Not you! Him!" The gargoyle pointed at Rupert. "All of you, actually, if you don't want to die."

"I can't trust you, you're one of Ekstrand's—" Rupert began, readying his yo-yo.

"Dante's sister is about to kill everyone in this building," the gargoyle cut in. "Your Arbiters are dead. Now let's get out of here before you are too!" When Rupert hesitated, the gargoyle leaped onto the table. "Open a Way into Oxford, you idiot! We can't go the way I came, they're all dead in the Cloister already."

"I'm not going anywhere with you," Rupert said to it and then looked at Margritte, but she knew where she was going and it wasn't with either of them. She thrust the key into the nearest part of the wall and turned it to the left, opening a Way to her room. She reached for William's hand, he took it and she pulled him through, leaving Rupert to determine his own fate.

26

Cathy parked the car half a mile down the road from the gates to the asylum. She and Carter walked on to the entrance in the deepening twilight, silent for the first time in their journey. She'd talked so much on the drive from London that her throat felt sore. Excited by his change in status, Carter had bombarded her with questions and between them they'd drawn up a list of rights to announce to the staff once they got home.

She was grateful for something to keep her mind busy. Now she was just walking along a road her thoughts were tugged back to Will. The steward reported that he and his men had reached the hotel but never left and he'd ended up carrying out a rather hasty clean-up by Charming the staff on duty to believe that the group had paid and left to avoid any difficult enquiries.

There was nothing she could do to help, as Nathaniel had so forcefully said, so she had to keep her mind on the things she could change. She looked at Carter, who looked back and smiled. "Are you ready for this?"

"Yes, your Grace. Are you?"

She grinned. "Hell, yes."

They reached the gates and Carter had a quick look first. "We should walk along the boundary and approach across the grass over there, your Grace. It minimises the chance of us being seen before I cut the phone line."

She nodded and followed him in, noticing the orchids growing at the boundary between the trees and the lawn. She wondered if they had

something to do with the disorientation she'd experienced on her earlier visit. Not that it mattered now; they weren't going to leave by the driveway.

Carter guided her along the best route, pointed out a place for her to hide whilst he cut the phone line, and then beckoned her over to the house. Lights were on inside, on both floors, and she saw the curtains being closed by the orderlies.

When they reached the front door and she held her finger above the bell, the doubts flooded in. Would the Patroons send people to stop what she was doing? Will would probably be furious when he got back…could she—

"Stop it," she whispered to herself, to the frightened child inside her still fearful of getting a beating for putting a foot wrong in a dance lesson. "This is the right thing to do."

She pressed the doorbell and listened to it clang inside. With one last glance at Carter, who seemed rather excited, she tried to prepare for what lay ahead.

Will let himself be pulled through into a room that smelt of freshly baked bread. As Margritte closed the Way behind them he noticed a painting over the fireplace with black silk draped over it, and the same drapes over the sprite lamps in the room, creating a dour atmosphere. There was fresh bread and butter, along with a glass of milk on a tray. His stomach rumbled.

"Please, sit," Margritte said and busied herself with buttering some bread after handing him the glass of milk.

He drank it all without pausing for breath, the cold glass soothing his throbbing lip. He took the plate she offered him, and the handkerchief. When he ran it around his mouth it came away red. He noticed the time on a grandfather clock in the corner. "Is it really morning?"

“No, he was just trying to disorient you. You were in there for about four hours. I’m sorry they hurt you.” She went to the window, still sniffing. “Do you have any idea what that gargoyle was talking about?”

“No.”

“I’ll do everything I can to put this right, William. It got out of hand.”

He nodded. “I know. We both will.”

“We need to go to the Hebdomadal Council,” she said after a few moments. “They’ll be debating what to do next. We need to go there together and explain it’s all…resolved between us.” She turned to face him. “I am right in saying that, aren’t I?”

“Yes.” He stood, aching all over, his legs and arms trembling with fatigue and the residue of adrenalin that had rampaged through his body. “I forgive you, if you’ll forgive me. I did far, far worse, of course, but they were both acts of passion, and both have far-reaching consequences. I’ll make sure my family know my feelings on the matter.”

She nodded. “And Bartholomew’s reputation?”

“I will discuss the matter with my patron in person,” he said. “If a way can be found to tell the truth without damaging Lord Iris’ standing, then I’ll do so. I hope, in the meantime, the knowledge that those behind this foul business have been punished will give you some peace.”

Margritte’s eyes were still reddened and shining with tears. “It will,” she finally replied. “Are you able to walk? They’ll be meeting at the Sheldonian. It’s not far from here.”

“I thought that was a theatre.”

“It is, but it’s also one of the main university meeting venues.”

“And the city is run by a council?”

She pulled a shawl from a nearby chair and wrapped it around her shoulders. “Yes. It’s very different to Londinium. When all of this is over, I

would be delighted to explain it to you." She paused. "If I have the opportunity."

He went to her side and offered his arm. "I'll see to it that you do."

Cathy recognised the man who answered the door, but now she was dressed like a Duchess he didn't realise they'd already met. He was one of the orderlies and a big man, but not as huge as Carter—a fact he seemed to evaluate after they both stared at each other for a few moments. Cathy could almost smell the testosterone.

"My name is Catherine Reticulata-Iris and I'm the Duchess of Londinium," she said, channelling a memory of her mother at her most frightening. "I'm here to speak to the manager."

It had the desired effect. "Come in," the man said and, as he went to a room down the hallway, Cathy exchanged a grin with Carter.

Soon after, the manager darted out, a short man with a paunch and receding hairline. A napkin was still tucked into his collar. "Your Grace?" He hurried over, tugging the napkin free and dabbing at his mouth as he walked.

"I'm here to speak to all the residents and all of the staff, yourself included. Is there a place I could address everyone?"

"This is…most irregular…We're serving dinner and—"

"Perfect. I assume everyone dines in the large hall at the end of the hallway?" He nodded, dumb with shock. "If you'd be so kind as to round everyone up? There's a good fellow."

Like her mother, like her father, like Dame bloody Iris, Cathy didn't ask for what she wanted. Instead she stated what he needed to do as if he'd already agreed. He could obey, as the social cues dictated, or he could

refuse and risk embarrassment and confrontation. She held her breath, watching to see which way he would go.

“I…I need to speak to my superior.”

“Is he here?”

“No, I need to make a phone call.”

“That would take far too long and be most inconvenient. You don’t need to phone someone to ask if one person can speak to the people here, surely? Certainly not the Duchess of Londinium.”

A muscle beneath his right eye twitched. She felt sorry for him. “This way,” he finally said after a glance at Carter’s arms.

“Keep an eye on him,” she whispered to Carter.

The manager had a brief hushed conversation with the orderly, who began to round up members of staff they came across on the way to the dining hall. Cathy’s heartbeat became more frantic with every step. What if they didn’t believe her? What if they laughed at her? What if her voice came out like air from a leaky balloon when she got up to speak?

But then she was in the dining hall, all of the residents assembled at long tables and the last members of staff being ushered in. She found a chair to stand on with a helping hand from Carter.

Cathy took a breath, trying to stop her knees from shaking as the assembled looked at her. There were about thirty staff and over a hundred residents and every single one regarded her expectantly.

“Good evening,” she began.

“Speak up!” someone called from the back.

“My name is Catherine and I’m the Duchess of Londinium. I feel you should know that, because it might make you believe that I can actually do what I’m about to.” She glanced at Carter. He was busy watching the room, vigilant for foul play. “I know that many of you were put in this place

against your will because you had an opinion that was dangerous to Society. I know that many of you have tried to leave and couldn't, because of a Charm placed on the boundary."

"I knew it!" a man cried out and was rapidly shushed by those around him.

"I also know that some of you are here because you need to live in Mundanus again. And I can understand that. But I don't think you should be confined to one part of it, and I don't think anyone has the right to keep anyone here who doesn't want to be, regardless of why you ended up here in the first place."

The room was silent, every face fixed intently upon her. The manager was drained of colour, nurses and orderlies gathered around him. Some looked terrified.

"And I say this to the staff too. There's more to life than doing what they've told you to do. You should have choices and you should have rights as employees. The right to earn wages, to resign and do something totally different with your life if that's what you want. I know how the Agency works now and it's wrong to just let them use you like slaves."

The staff looked at each other and then to the manager.

An elderly woman caught Cathy's eye, smiling away like she was watching a fabulous play. "Go on," the lady mouthed to her.

"I'm going to open a Way to my house in Londinium. Anyone who wishes to leave this place may come with me. I'll give you somewhere to stay that's safe from the Agency so you can decide what you want to do with your lives. If you don't want to leave Mundanus, that's fine—come with me and you can stay in the mundane wing of the house. I'll help each and every one of you to find a way to be independent if that's what you wish. No one has the right to keep you here. No one has the right to tell you

how to live and no one has the right to control what you say or think. So I say…sod them! Let's find our own way. Who's coming with me?"

The streets of Oxenford were deserted, something Will found rather disconcerting. He was surrounded by the most beautiful architecture, reminding him of Aquae Sulis with its warm sand-coloured stone and neo-classical grandeur, but without people promenading and eager to be seen in their finery.

"Is it always this quiet here?"

The clip of Margritte's shoes echoed from the walls as they hurried down a narrow street, wide enough for only one carriage. "No."

"Who sits on this council? Anyone who'll be sympathetic?"

"To me or to you?"

"You," he replied. She was the one at risk; she'd convinced the Sorcerer to take not only him but several other members of the Iris family into custody. He had no idea what the Council was like, nor the kind of justice they dispensed, but suspected she'd be exiled from the city at the very least.

"My son is the Vice-Chancellor," she said.

"And the Chancellor, is he a reasonable man?"

She didn't reply. The narrow lane opened out onto a wider street and she guided him to the right. His ankle was throbbing but he could limp along well enough. He wanted to go home and have a brandy and a meal and put it all behind him.

In moments a curved building came into view on the right, surrounded by a set of high railings punctuated by stone pillars. On top of each one was a carved bust but Will didn't stop to examine them. He was too busy trying to think of a way to bring Margritte out of the situation unscathed. If they

exiled her, he'd take her back to Londinium. He wondered whether anyone had noticed he and his men hadn't returned. Unlikely, if it was only the evening. He looked at his ring finger and the dried blood. There were still splinters to be pulled out. He thought back to when he felt it hurt when Cathy was attacked. Was she aware something had happened to him? Was Lord Iris aware?

As they reached the doors they both heard someone shouting within.

"I demand to see the Chancellor!"

"My brother," Will said. It was going to be more complicated than he hoped. Not only would they have to placate the ruling council of Oxenford, they'd have to talk Nathaniel down from a temper. "He sounds worse than he actually is," he said to Margritte when he noticed how nervous she looked. "Don't worry, I'll make sure he sees reason. There's no point making this into something worse than it needs to be. We can discuss compensation for the Irises who reside here. It can all be fixed."

Dreadfully pale, Margritte pushed the door open and they walked in, unchallenged by any guards, which surprised Will. To get into the Londinium Court one would have to pass through several guarded points. Here, it felt like anyone could walk in off the street and straight into the presence of those in power.

They walked through one antechamber to the sound of Nathaniel demanding to be treated with respect and then Margritte opened doors onto a large D-shaped interior with seating running in a horseshoe shape around the room. There were two levels of gallery seats, marble pillars and a fresco on the ceiling with dramatic orange clouds.

At the far end of the room, a young man—who looked so like Bartholomew that Will's breath caught in his throat—was sitting in a chair at the centre of a crescent of seated gentlemen nearing twenty in number.

Nathaniel was shouting at him and he didn’t seem to be taking the pressure well. It looked like he was trying not to be sick.

The other men, all presumably members of the Council, were either locked in hushed discussions with each other or studiously avoiding Nathaniel’s glare. No one noticed they had entered.

“Oh, no.” Margritte clutched his arm. “The torches are out.”

He noticed two elaborate gilded stands, one on either side of her son’s chair. It looked like small baskets at the top could hold flames when lit. “Why does that matter?”

“It means the Chancellor is dead.”

But Will saw something that made him far more concerned: the sword hanging from Nathaniel’s waist belonged to the Patroon. Sir Iris himself must have given it to him, meaning that Nathaniel was there with his authority, and an implicit blessing to use it where he deemed fit. That the Patroon had given it to the best swordsman in Albion was a powerful statement.

“Let’s sort this mess out,” Margritte said and strode down the aisle to reach the Council. She walked ahead bravely as he struggled to think of a way through that would see her safe and his brother satisfied.

“Mr Reticulata-Iris, I am Margritte Semper-Augustus Tulipa and I beg your forgiveness for interrupting you. As you can see, your brother is here with me, and we are both ready to explain what happened today. Please don’t see it as a sign of disrespect that only the Vice-Chancellor is here. I assure you he is the highest ranking individual in Oxenford.”

Nathaniel didn’t turn straightaway, forcing her to address his back most rudely. He turned slowly as she spoke of the Vice-Chancellor, fixing her with such a hateful look that his face was monstrous.

“Perhaps William can—”

Nathaniel backhanded her with such force she was knocked onto the floor and for a few moments lay there without moving. Her son cried out but when Nathaniel turned and looked at him he sank back into his chair, cowed.

Horrified, Will started to walk towards Nathaniel, hoping Margritte would stay still and let him talk his brother down. “See, I am here, Nathaniel,” he said as lightly as he could. “I know passions are high, but surely we do not need to strike a woman to express ourselves?”

Nathaniel’s eyes widened at the sight of him and Will remembered the bruising on his face. “My brother,” he said, stepping over Margritte. “I’m so glad to see you.” In seconds he had strode over to Will and planted a hand on his chest. “Lord Iris intends that I take this city,” he whispered. “Back me up.” He turned around and went back to the Council as Margritte was struggling onto her hands and knees, clearly badly shaken. Nathaniel’s signet ring that marked him as their father’s heir had cut her cheek and Will felt himself spiralling into despairing panic. It was going to happen again; Iris was going to use them to take another city and destroy more lives.

Nathaniel put his hand between her shoulder blades and pushed her back to the floor. “Stay down, whore. You kidnap my brother, have him beaten and you expect me to listen to the lies that fall from your mouth? I know what you’re capable of. Your husband tried to have my sister-in-law murdered. You haven’t learned the lesson my brother taught your family, it seems.”

“Your brother has been returned to you.” Margritte’s son finally found his voice. “I ask that you leave and we will deal with this matter ourselves.”

“What’s your name?”

“Alexander.”

“I hardly think the son of the perpetrator will dispense any justice I find satisfactory, Alexander. Where is this Chancellor of yours?”

Alexander glanced at the others in the council and a few nodded to him. “My mother spoke the truth,” he replied. “Oxenford is without a Chancellor. I—”

“Then whom do I duel to take the city?”

The men who’d remained silent burst into cries of indignation. “This is Oxenford, sir!” one of them shouted. “We are a civilised city—the paragon of enlightenment and learning. We do not duel for power like barbarians!”

Nathaniel stared at him. “Then how do you go about finding a new Chancellor? Don’t tell me that lily over there will inherit the title?”

“The Chancellor is voted in by the Congregation of Oxenford. It will take several days to organise.”

“*You* can’t vote a new one in?”

“We are the Hebdomadal Council, sir,” another man said in a tremulous voice. “It is not our place to do so.”

“But…” one of them said, drawing Nathaniel’s attention with the tone of his voice. “There is a statute dictating that, should an emergency arise, the Hebdomadal Council does have the right to elect a Chancellor.” Ignoring the furious glares of his fellows, the man cleared his throat. “I do consider this an emergency.”

Will was convinced the man was a Wisteria. There was something about his hairline that gave it away, and the way he was willing to ingratiate himself with whoever was on the rise. He could hardly feel superior to him though, standing there, doing nothing as Nathaniel loomed over Margritte and glared at her son. But to stand against him would be the highest treason; Nathaniel acted with the authority of his patron and Will had no power in the city to fall back on. He was stripped of Charms, had no sword and no

desire to incur his patron's wrath. If he fell from grace, Cathy and Sophia would be put at risk and he had to protect them.

Nathaniel drew his sword and pointed it at Alexander. "Do I have your vote, sir?"

The poor man looked at his mother, who was curling into a ball, shaking as her world fell apart. The tip of the Patroon's sword pressed into his waistcoat and Will looked away, as disgusted with his brother as he was with himself. He listened to each member of the Council giving their vote under duress until Alexander said, "The Council recognises Nathaniel Reticulata-Iris as the Chancellor of Oxenford."

Will watched Nathaniel pull Alexander from the chair, shove him aside and sit in it himself. "You are no longer the Vice-Chancellor." He pointed his sword at the Wisteria. "You are." Looking back at Alexander, he said, "You'll go and free the Irises from wherever you've imprisoned them and you'll bring them here. If any of them have even a scratch upon them, I'll inflict twice the injury upon you."

Alexander took a step towards his mother, reaching down to help her up but Nathaniel batted him away with the flat of the blade. "She stays there until I have somewhere to put her. Go."

Will stepped aside to let Alexander pass. Nathaniel smiled at him. "Well, that's all been seen to. Let's get you home, shall we?"

"Margritte is a resident of Londinium," Will said. "I'll take her with me."

Nathaniel shook his head. "The crime was committed here, dear brother." His smile was cruel and it sickened Will. "I will dispense justice in the way *I* see fit."

27

Cathy felt sweat prickling beneath the high lace collar of her dress. The hushed tension in the room was becoming unbearable.

“But what about the Patroons?” a lady asked.

She’d worried about that herself but she tried her best not to show it. “I’ll handle them. None of them will be able to come and take you away, I promise. You’ll be safe.”

“You can guarantee that?”

Could she? She was about to lie and say yes, she could keep them safe from anyone and anything, but of course she couldn’t. “I can’t,” she said after a pause. “I can’t predict everything they might do. All I can give you is the chance to stand up and say, ‘No, you can’t treat people like this’. I hope it will force them into realising the world has changed. As long as this place stays secret they hold the power. Do you really think that your friends and families will let anything happen to hurt you even more, once they discover what has been done? Do you think the Patroons could keep control if everyone knew you were no threat and yet were treated terribly again?”

People looked at each other, searching the faces of their friends for courage or fear.

“It’s a risk,” Cathy said. “But if we do nothing, more people will be silenced. You’ll all die of old age. Nothing will ever change. Come with me. Make it happen!”

A woman stood up and tossed her napkin onto the table. Cathy had spoken to her earlier that day, when she was disguised. She was one of the

women from the old group, one of those who disappeared from Society because she spoke her mind. Her name was Clarissa—one of the missing women she'd been looking for—and she looked like she was in her sixties. "I'm going with her," she announced to the room. "We have nothing to lose except a slow death. Let's do something with some meaning, for goodness' sake! If this girl is willing to put her neck on the line, then we should be willing to stand up for ourselves too."

Another woman stood up, then another who pulled a man onto his feet too and kissed him on the cheek. Several were looking towards the elderly woman who'd urged Cathy on, but she was still seated. When at least half of the room had stood up she did so too and then many more rose from their chairs. Cathy wished she'd met that lady earlier; she seemed influential. In moments, only one man remained seated.

When everyone else noticed, he shouted, "Why's everyone standing up?" The woman next to him explained in a loud voice and he beamed at Cathy. "Splendid. I want to give my son a piece of my mind and a good curse to boot."

Cathy looked at them all and took a moment to let what she'd done sink in. She soon realised that if she dwelt upon it she'd implode with anxiety and be unable to take another step forwards, so she considered the practicalities instead. "If you have any personal items you want to take with you, go and pack them now. We'll be leaving in ten minutes. If you need help to do that, let me know." Cathy stepped down from the chair. "Carter, go to the staff, answer any questions they have and let me know if any of them make calls on their mobiles. They may have them, seeing as they live in Mundanus all the time."

"Do you want me to stop the calls?"

“No, the Agency will find out very soon, one way or the other. If they want to turn up and curse me, you’ll be able to stop them, right?”

“Yes, your Grace, I understand.”

The elderly woman came to her side as he left. “You’re one of Dame Iris’ little poodles, aren’t you?” The woman was peering at her through a lorgnette with a beautifully decorated handle.

Cathy wasn’t sure how to react. “This hasn’t got anything to do with Dame Iris.”

“Oh, I know that dear.” The lady continued to scrutinise her. “Duchess but recently wed, that’s interesting, and someone the Dame really doesn’t think very capable at all. You’re not very graceful either. Oh, dear, I should imagine you’re having a perfectly horrid time with her.”

Cathy wondered why the lady was taking such an interest when there were more exciting things to attend to.

“Less than a year under her thumb, I see, that must be why you still have some spirit in you. Before you ask, I can tell by your dress. She had it made for you, didn’t she?”

“How could you possibly know all this from a dress?”

“The trim is less than an inch wide and made from lace. She detests lace and only has it put on the dresses of those she likes the least. And your cuffs have three buttons at the wrist, indicating you need a great deal of attention. But don’t be offended—take heart in the knowledge of her little system and the fact she needs to do these things. She has a terrible memory for new brides. You all blur into one for her, because she’s so desperately bored of having to look after you all.”

“It sounds like you know her well.”

“All too well. Hateful woman, I hope she catches the pox and is scarred beyond recognition.”

Cathy tried not to grin. “I’m sorry, but you are…?”

“Eleanor,” she said with a smile. “Formerly Dame Iris herself, before that spiteful hag destroyed me. Do close your mouth, dear, I have no desire to see your tonsils. We have a great deal to talk about and I have nothing to pack, so I would like to speak to you as soon as we make our escape. I suspect you’re just the person I’ve been hoping for.”

So that was why so many people followed her lead. “I’m surprised you didn’t stand up straightaway.”

“I wanted to make sure people stood up because they wanted to leave, not because they thought I wanted them to.” She took Cathy’s hand and patted it. “That’s the thing about authority, dear, it can get in the way when you want to be certain that people are doing what *they* want.”

Ekstrand was lying at the bottom of the stairs when Max found him, his neck broken and his right leg bent at an unnatural angle. He hadn’t been dead long enough to look wax-like. When Max closed his eyelids, it looked like he was asleep.

“He’s here,” Max called to the gargoyle and Rupert. “It must have killed him at the top of the stairs. It doesn’t look like he tried to break his fall.”

Rupert came and stared at Ekstrand as the gargoyle huddled in the corner of the entrance hall, its stone claws over its eyes but still seeing the body as he did now.

“I wonder if it really is him,” Rupert said, crouching down to prod Ekstrand’s cheek. “He could have done the same as me.”

He was talking about the dopplegänger he’d had the gargoyle throw through a Way into his property. Max had seen that through the gargoyle’s

eyes as he waited in an Oxford street, wondering whether they'd chosen the right Sorcerer to save.

"But I doubt it," Rupert said.

Max agreed. "He's wearing his Sunday clothes. I can't see him having the time to pick the right outfit, nor would he have needed to in order to fool Dante's sister."

"Interesting that she just left the body." Rupert pulled at the smock and Max noticed a spot of blood on it. "Looks like she put a pin in him to test if his heart had turned to stone." He looked away for a moment. "I think the dopplegänger's heart would have done the same. Hard to tell, not knowing how she did it exactly. Of course, if she tried hard enough she'd be able to see it had never really been alive, but it looks like she isn't the autopsy type."

"Did you make it because you knew about what she did to the others?"

"I made it because he tried to kill me," Rupert replied. "I didn't know about this sister until today. What a fucking mess." He looked back down at Ekstrand. "Poor crazy bastard. Not even his famous wards were enough." He pointed at the gargoyle. "Is it broken or something?"

"We're upset," the gargoyle said.

"Don't feel guilty," Rupert said, straightening up.

"You would say that," the gargoyle replied.

"Look, if Ekstrand had listened to you both, he'd be alive now. Shit happens." He raised an eyebrow at the gargoyle's stare. "Wondering if you made the right choice?"

The gargoyle didn't answer, neither did Max. The Sorcerer of Mercia was so different from Ekstrand he wasn't sure what to say or do around him. His boss was dead. Arguably, Rupert had authority over him now, but he wasn't acting like he did. Once the gargoyle had persuaded him to leave

the Bodleian he'd acted swiftly and clearly had an emergency plan ready to go at a moment's notice. Through the gargoyle's eyes he'd seen images of large artificial men carrying objects out of rooms. Then they'd rendezvoused with him and from an underground room the three of them watched Ekstrand's house through a scrying glass, debating what to do next. They said nothing as the Sorceress led a group of Arbiters into the house after breaking the formulae she'd painted on. It had taken her moments to break Ekstrand's wards and they were in the house for less than five minutes, leaving with surprisingly little. Perhaps Ekstrand's artefacts weren't anything special compared to the treasures she'd already accumulated.

After seeing her in action, Rupert announced he was going to fake his own death to everyone, not just her, and go underground. When the gargoyle asked if they could go to see if Ekstrand survived, there had been no argument.

"What do we do now?" Max asked.

"I've got a few things to take care of," Rupert replied. "Do you want me to open a Way for you back to Oxford? Somewhere else?"

"That depends on what you want me to do."

Rupert frowned at him. "Do what you want. I'm not your master."

"We'll stay here," Max said, wanting to look for Petra and Axon. "Someone has to bury him."

"You are going to do something about Dante's sister, aren't you?" the gargoyle asked.

"Yeah." Rupert put his hands in his pockets and rocked back and forth on his toes and heels. "Haven't got a Scooby what that'll be yet, but I'm not going to hide for ever. It's gonna take a while to work it all out."

"Is there anything else you want to know from us?"

He shook his head. “The gargoyle told me where I can find her. Speaking of which, if you need any help, or if you find anything else out, call this number and leave a message with a way to get in touch.” He pulled an old receipt from his pocket and grabbed a pen from the table on the other side of the hall to scribble a phone number on the back. “It’s secure and checked three times a day. Give me yours.”

“I don’t have a phone,” Max said.

“Get one. It’s the twenty-first century, for fuck’s sake. Then leave a message with the number. Just in case I need you.”

Max nodded and put the piece of paper in his inside pocket.

“Thanks for getting me out,” Rupert said. “For what it’s worth, I think you made the right choice. Ekstrand was a relic, like all of the others.”

“What about the Chapters and the rest of the Heptarchy?” Max asked. “No one is protecting the innocents.”

“It sucks, but things change,” Rupert said. “Long overdue, now I think about it. We had things nice and cushy for a thousand years, and that’s probably too long. We got complacent but the fittest will survive. It’s the law of evolution: adapt or die.”

“Do you mean us or the innocents?” the gargoyle asked.

Rupert grinned. “Both. Take care, you two.”

He opened a Way with a silver yo-yo and then they were alone in a silent house.

“The clocks have stopped,” the gargoyle said, its stone ears swivelling like a nervous cat listening for trouble.

“Let’s look for Axon and Petra and bury the bodies,” Max suggested. It needed to be done and it was something they were capable of doing without having to make any far-reaching decisions.

Axon’s body was at the top of the spiral staircase leading down to the library. A tray, smashed teapot and shattered cake plates lay beside him. A few slices of Battenberg had tumbled down the steps, leaving a trail of yellow and pink crumbs and fragmented ribbons of yellow marzipan. The gargoyle’s dry weeping rasped through the room.

Max listened to the noise as he closed Axon’s eyes. He felt nothing. The man at his feet had cared for him when he was a day out of hospital with a broken leg, he’d cooked for him, made sure he ate at least one hot meal a day and given the gargoyle privacy when it had hidden in the parlour or under the stairs, distressed on Max’s behalf.

He’d died alone, doing his job, never a threat to anyone. Max had no idea who his family used to be, where he used to live before he became Ekstrand’s butler or what his life was like. It had ceased to be relevant, like it had for Max. They did their work for the Sorcerer and nothing else mattered. There was no one to inform of his death and no one to mourn him.

Max sat on the top step and slowly reached towards the gargoyle’s back. He lay his hand on the stone and let his own grief fill him. An ache bloomed in his chest, a physical pressure built, pushing up his throat as his skull felt like it was being gripped in a vice. He coughed once, twice, and then the third time there were tears with it. He thought of the house as it used to be, the quiet comfort that Axon provided, the sound of his gentle throat-clearing at the doorway and the eyebrow twitch when he disagreed but was too polite and well-trained to say anything.

Then he wasn’t only crying for Axon, but also for his mentor, for the researchers and staff at the cloister. They were his friends before his soul was dislocated. They made him laugh, they cheered him on, they fought and

argued with him and some competed against him for selection. All the people who knew him when he was a whole person were dead.

He was crying for himself, for the boy he used to be. He wept for everything he had lost, from the chance to have children to the moments of pleasure, relief, satisfaction and a dozen other emotions denied him every day. He was once an innocent. He was once a boy with everything ahead of him and nothing to fear but his mother's disappointment. She never knew what happened to him. She would have died wondering what happened to her little boy, perhaps even blaming herself for not watching him closely enough. He wept for her too.

For a time there were no thoughts. He was consumed by the physicality of his grief, unable to do anything but draw in the next breath to be released in violent sobs. When he finally came back to himself, he realised the gargoyle's arms were wrapped around him and his arms were clinging to its waist, his head on its stone shoulder.

"That's better," it said. "Are we all right?"

"Yes," Max said and thought about letting go but didn't. He was afraid, he realised. There was no one to tell him what to do and the case was solved, even if the perpetrator was still free. There were no more leads to pursue and nowhere safe to go. The Chapter was gone, it was likely the other Chapters would soon disintegrate or were already destroyed, and he had no means to find them anyway.

"It'll be all right," the gargoyle said, its arms still around him. "We'll work something out. We could…go fishing or something."

Max laughed at thought of the two of them in a rowing boat and the sound startled him. He let the hope that everything would work out fill him for a moment more and then pulled back. The gargoyle released him and

Max settled back into the neutral state he was used to. His cheeks were still wet; he dried them with the sleeve of his coat and then stood.

“Let’s find Petra.”

They expected her to be in the library. Max sent the gargoyle down the steps, just in case any of Ekstrand’s wards were still active on the doorway to the library. It was empty and there were gaps on the shelves. They searched the rest of the house, from the basement to the attic, even in the rooms that used to be out of bounds. None of the locks had been left unbroken by Ekstrand’s murderer, but Petra was nowhere to be seen.

“Perhaps she was out when it happened,” the gargoyle said. Max could hear the hope in its voice.

“Let’s go and find the best place to bury Mr Ekstrand and Axon,” Max said. “Maybe she’ll come back.”

They went out the back door, using the key Axon had used to get from the Nether house into Mundanus. It was becoming dark so Max headed for the bushy borders at the edge of the lawn to look for a place where they could dig without being noticed.

“Max!” Petra called from a far corner of the garden. By the time he had worked out the direction, she was running towards him. She threw her arms around him and sobbed until the gargoyle arrived.

“Were you in Mundanus when it happened?” Max asked.

“No,” she said with a sniff. “I was in the library. I heard Axon drop the tray and…” She broke down.

After taking her into the anchor property, Max and the gargoyle managed to get enough out of her to piece together what had happened. She believed the library’s wards—more extreme than any others in the house—managed to protect her from the initial attack. At first she hid, then when she ventured out she heard intruders in the house and barricaded herself in

the library, carrying out Ekstrand's instructions to save the most precious books in the event of an emergency.

"And then I came into Mundanus and hid in the garden," she finished. "I couldn't go back in there, not by myself."

Max made tea in the Nether kitchen and brought it through, and they drank it on the back step of the house as the stars came out. Between them, Max and the gargoyle told Petra what they saw in the tower, and how they saved Rupert. Neither of them mentioned the fact they chose to save him instead of Ekstrand.

Unable to rest whilst the bodies were left in the Nether, the three of them dug two graves and buried Mr Ekstrand and Axon side by side beneath two giant conifer trees. Petra knelt at Ekstrand's graveside, weeping for hours, until Max and the gargoyle agreed to bring her inside and light a fire.

The gargoyle found food for them in the fridge and they ate in silence. More tea was drunk by the light of the fire in the mundane living room and the gargoyle lay at Max's feet, resting against the toes of his shoes like a faithful dog.

"I know what I want to do," Max finally said and Petra jumped. The gargoyle rested its head on Max's knee and he knew that he'd made the right decision.

"What is it?"

"I want to start my own Chapter. I want to protect the innocents. We might need to do it differently, but I want to find a way."

"I'll help you," Petra said. "Those books will be useful and I know how to read them safely. And I know where Mr Ekstrand hid some of his artefacts. They might still be there."

“We’ll need a new cloister,” the gargoyle said. “This place isn’t safe enough. She knows where it is.”

“Rupert can help us with that,” Max replied. “We’ll have to learn how to use the internet too. It might help us to find breaches whilst we recruit staff.”

“It sounds like a plan,” the gargoyle said and Petra agreed. “Can I just make one request?” it added. When Max nodded, it said, “Can we have just one day off first?”

“Yes,” Max said. “We’ll go fishing.”

28

When the front door wasn’t opened as he reached the top step, Will knew something was wrong. One of the footmen, returned with the released Irises in Oxenford, hurried to open it for him.

“Morgan?” Will called as he entered. He saw two maids rushing across the top of the stairs, bed linen piled high in their arms. There was the sound of people, lots of them, but scattered all over the house rather than the concentrated roar created by a party.

A grey-haired woman came out of a nearby room. “Who’s Morgan?”

“Who are you?” He watched another elderly woman follow her out. “What in the Worlds is going on here? Where is my wife?”

The woman pointed down the hallway, towards Cathy’s library.

“Find Morgan,” Will told the nearest footman. “The rest of you stay nearby in case I need you.”

He passed the two ladies, who were whispering to each other, and caught sight of more people in the drawing room with them. He quickened his pace as much as he could, feeling cheated of the warm and relieved welcome he’d anticipated, the pain in his ankle adding to his irritation.

He could hear Cathy as he approached the door of her library.

“Don’t tell me what I have the right to do or not! You can’t say I’ve stolen those people unless you claim to own them, and I’m certain you can’t do that.”

“They are the property of the Agency.” The man’s voice was familiar. Will stopped and waved a hand to his footmen to stay back. He would learn

more if he stayed quiet and listened.

“Quite apart from the fact it’s a foul claim to make, saying they are your property only proves that you’ve been conning us—and the entirety of Society—by charging for their wages. I know for a fact that since I established this household I’ve paid over twenty thousand pounds in wages and not a single penny of that has gone to my staff.”

“You were paying for their time and our management of—”

“Don’t try and wriggle out of this! And don’t try and tell me that the people who have chosen to work for me don’t have the right to do that, because I’ve given it to them. If you try to take them from this house, or threaten any of them, I’ll tell every single wife that runs a household in Albion that they’ve been collectively paying the Agency millions of pounds for hundreds of years to do nothing but run a slave racket.”

“You think they’ll care?” the man laughed. “All they’ll care about is whether the linen is clean and the chamber pots emptied.”

Will didn’t like the way he spoke to Cathy. There was no deference and no respect. It sounded like he was from the Agency. Was it someone he’d dealt with in the past?

“If you return the staff and patients to the asylum and accept that your staff will be replaced here, your reputation will remain intact,” the man continued. “You know the consequences should you cause any further problems for us.”

Blackmail! Will touched the door handle, about to open the door and slam the man against a wall when he heard Cathy speak.

“Your note stated, very clearly, that should I cause the slightest inconvenience or loss of income to your venerable establishment Dame Iris would be told about my past. I’m rather confused by this conversation. Why aren’t you with her now, telling her all about my terrible secret?”

Her question made Will pause. He wanted to hear the answer. As the man hesitated, Will remembered where he'd heard that voice before: the hospital, the day she was stabbed. He was the Agency man he'd bribed to keep her mundane history secret. He'd done it to protect Cathy, and the vile dog had used the information to blackmail her. He gripped the handle tighter.

"I can tell you why." Cathy had got tired of waiting. "It's because as soon as it's no longer a secret, you don't have any power over me."

"Your—"

"In fact, keeping all of the terrible things the Agency does secret depends on my being afraid. Well, I've only got one thing I actually want to say to you about how you treat the staff, those prisoners you kept and the way you've been threatening me, something I learned in Mundanus: fuck off. Go, tell people whatever you want about me, I don't care. The only people whose opinions matter in all of this are my husband and myself. I'm glad I lived in Mundanus and Will didn't bat an eyelid when I told him, because he's better than all of the men in Society put together. So screw your blackmail. I'm not afraid of you any more."

"This isn't the last you'll hear from me."

"I should hope not," Cathy said as footsteps came closer to the door. "I expect a letter of apology. And a refund, you dishonest bastard."

The door handle turned but was released again. Bennet had changed his mind. His steps moved away from the door again and Will readied himself to burst in at the slightest hint that he was hurting her. "You may not care about your own reputation." Bennet sounded calm again. "It's clear you don't have the good sense to do so. But I imagine you care about the little girl you're hiding here. You may be able to convince your staff that she's

your husband's distant cousin, but I know who his cousins are and she isn't one of them. In fact—"

Will opened the door. "Mr Bennet," he said. "I was struggling to recall your name. I won't forget it now."

"Your Grace, I'm so glad you're back, I'm afraid your wife—"

"I don't want to listen to anything you have to say," Will replied. He beckoned to the footmen. "This man has been threatening my wife. Remove any personal effects and take him into custody. Watch him and don't let him speak to anyone." As Bennet spluttered, Will suppressed the urge to punch him. He was tired and needed to recover before he could organise an appropriate punishment. Besides, he wanted the wretch to sweat a while.

"Will!" Cathy threw her arms around him once Bennet had been taken away. "What happened? You're hurt! Nathaniel said—"

He kissed the questions out of her, holding her close until he was sure he was really home. "Where's Carter? Why isn't he keeping the likes of Bennet away from you?"

"He's…running an errand for me. Where have you been?"

What to tell her? If he said anything about Margritte he'd have to admit he'd failed to protect her friend. "It's a long and unpleasant story, but I'm home now."

"Does Nathaniel know you're all right? He went a bit…mental."

"Yes, he does. Cathy, why are there strangers in the drawing room?"

"Oh…yeah, sorry about that. There's a very good explanation for that. I wanted to tell you before you came into the house, but I had to deal with that arsehole Bennet."

He watched her speak. There was something different about her. "I heard everything through the door. You were brilliant. Why didn't you tell me what he was doing?"

“He cursed me the day you gave me the library. He blackmailed me to the tune of a hundred thousand pounds and then, when I started to find out what he was really up to, he threatened to tell Dame Iris about my time in Mundanus. Bastard.”

“You don’t have to worry about that weasel any more. Cathy, what in the Worlds is going on here?”

“Your Grace,” Morgan said from the doorway. “I’m dreadfully sorry to interrupt but a Mr Ferran is here to see you. He says it’s urgent.”

“Who?” Will asked, irritated by the way Morgan seemed to be looking to Cathy for a response.

“I’m very pleased to see you are home, your Grace,” Morgan said to him. “I don’t believe he’s from the Agency,” he said, focusing on Cathy again.

“All right, well…” she looked at Will. “Tell him I’m sorry but he’ll have to wait.”

Will frowned. “It feels like I’m not really home,” he said, but, just as she was about to respond, Carter came in before Morgan closed the door.

“Did you find them?” Cathy asked.

“Yes, your Grace, and I followed the rest of your instructions. Both of them are comfortable.” He smiled at Will. “I’m glad to see you’re back, your Grace. We were a little worried about you.”

“I want to speak with you,” he replied. “You have specific instructions regarding the protection of my wife.”

Something about the way Carter looked at Cathy again made the anger spike.

Cathy put a hand on his arm. “We need to talk, Will. Come and sit down. We’ll get some ice for your lip, you poor thing, it looks sore.”

Carter took up his correct position, guarding the door, and that satisfied Will for now. He let himself be guided to a chair, soothed by her concern. He wanted to be cared for, he wanted to rest and have everything go back to normal, but underneath it all was the worry about what his brother would do to Margritte. Could he have done things differently and stood up to him better? Was it right of his Patroon and Iris to take the city? His head throbbed with doubts. He was so tired.

Cathy kissed his forehead once he was sitting down. The fatigue washed over him and he let himself rest whilst the ice arrived along with tea. He watched her wrap a few cubes in a linen napkin which she gathered up and then gave to him before sitting down. It made his lip sting but soon it was numbed enough to be an improvement.

“Bennet said something about an asylum,” he said as she poured tea. “And those people in the house…what have you done?”

“I rescued people from the Agency.”

He listened, aghast, as she told him what she’d discovered and what she’d done. By the end of it the fatigue had been superseded by a growing panic. Once the Agency broke the news to the Patroons, he’d be hauled in front of Sir Iris and made to explain his wife’s actions. No doubt some of the people in the place had been put there to keep them out of Society and not just because they were feminists.

“You just went and did this, without mentioning any of it to me beforehand?”

“You weren’t here.”

“I was away for a day, Cathy! Those people have been there for decades, they couldn’t wait just a few more hours?”

“No! Once I felt the curse break and the…wish kick off I knew what I had to do and I couldn’t wait a moment longer.”

Will’s anger was diverted towards Poppy. “It was Poppy’s magic influencing you to—”

“No!” She hit the arm of her chair with the flat of her hand. “This was me actually taking action and standing up to these bastards. Don’t write it off as anything else but that.”

“Cathy, you’ve set us against the entire Agency and by the sound of it, most—if not all—of the Patroons! With no forethought, no consideration of what it will mean for us and how this will affect anyone else. You want me to believe you’re that naive?”

“I want you to see that as long as things like the asylum and this organised slavery run by the Agency stay hidden, the Patroons can carry on controlling us all. We need to stand up and tell everyone in the Court about this. And we need to show them there’s another way to live—the best of both Worlds, so to speak. We need to prove that everything won’t fall apart if they pay their staff wages and treat them properly. And we need to give women rights too.”

“What about our patron? Damn it, what do you think Iris will say when he hears of this?”

She moved to the edge of her chair, hands balled into fists. “We have to stop being afraid. If enough people demand change, the Patroons and the Fae have to listen!”

“No, they don’t. They’ll Doll us or curse us or replace us altogether. How could you have been so thoughtless? I told you it was too dangerous to change anything so soon and you went ahead anyway.”

“Will, I’m sorry I’ve sprung this all on you but I don’t regret what I’ve done. This…this *feels* right. This is what I’m supposed to do with my life. If you want to replace me with some boring trophy wife then go ahead, I’ll find another way to protect these people. But I’m not going to backpedal

and I’m not going to keep quiet. You said you wanted a partnership. Well, it’s not just you deciding what we can and can’t do. It’s got to be both of us sticking together and making a difference, or nothing at all. Sacrifice me to Iris and I’ll face whatever that fucker has to throw at me, same for the Patroons. I refuse to live by their rules any more.” She paused for breath, her face flushed with passion. “Or join me. It’s going to be hard and they’re going to try and stop us, but if we both commit to this, people will listen. If we can change this city then they have to pay attention.”

Will closed his eyes, struggling to think clearly amidst the anger and worry. Bennet was a key player in it all and could be the perfect scapegoat. He could keep the Iris Patroon on side by giving him the news first and he probably had a little time to work out what to say; no one in the Agency would be rushing to tell their superiors what Cathy had done.

He hated being forced into it and he resented the way Cathy had stormed ahead without consulting him, but he was convinced the wish magic was influencing her, whether she liked the thought or not. To throw her to the wolves would make him no better than his brother. He thought about what Nathaniel did to Margritte, recalling the wretched feeling of powerlessness as his brother trampled a city into submission, and he knew he wanted things to change too. Cathy had forced his hand, but perhaps that was the best thing to do to drive away his guilt.

Cathy’s eyes were brilliantly blue against the blush in her cheeks and there was power in the way she looked back at him, ready to face whatever was to come. He hadn’t wanted to marry her, but now he was glad he did. She was alive in a way that so many of the women in Society were not. He’d always wanted someone to face the rest of the world with, rather than a decoration for his arm, to dance with at balls and give him children. The wish magic might have made her reckless, but she’d been brave enough to

stand up to her Patroon at her Coming of Age ceremony and forge a life alone in Mundanus before that magic had been cast.

“What’s it to be then?” she asked.

A knock on the door prevented his response. “My apologies, your Grace,” Morgan said. “But Mr Ferran said it’s urgent and that you may know him by his usual name—Sam.”

“Oh! Show him in,” Cathy said. “What’s wrong, Will? There’s no need to worry.”

Will seethed. He’d be the judge of that.

“Mr Ferran, your Grace,” Morgan announced.

“Carter!” Will called, spotting him next to the visitor, “escort this man from the house.”

“Will!” Cathy gave him a horrified look. “He’s nothing to do with the Agency, he’s a friend.”

“Oh, we’ve met,” Sam said. He looked different too. He was dressed in a superbly tailored suit for one thing. He still looked tired, but he was clean-shaven and stood taller, nothing like the saggy-shouldered man he’d found in Mundanus. He doubted his earlier dismissal of him. Perhaps this was a man Cathy could have fallen in love with.

Carter hadn’t obeyed his order, and was looking to Cathy for confirmation. Will felt like he’d come back to the same house but to a slightly different reality.

“You’ve met?” she asked.

“Yeah.” Sam smirked. “He held a sword up to my neck and threatened to kill me if I ever saw you again.”

“You did what?” Cathy turned to face Will.

“And yet here you are,” Will said.

Sam looked him up and down. “You’re looking a bit worse for wear. Did someone fight back?”

“I don’t have to—”

“Stop it, both of you. Sam, are you all right? Has something happened?”

He grinned. “Yeah. I’m Lord Iron now.”

“What does that mean?”

Will didn’t like the way Sam looked at him. He was fearless, and ready to fight. He could see it in his stance, the way his fists were partially curled. He felt unprepared and uncertain of Carter’s loyalty.

“It means you don’t have to stay here any more.” Sam smiled and held out his hand. “I break their magic now. I’ve just been to Exilium and freed those dancers we found—do you remember them? I got that memory back that Poppy took from me and that time debt he screwed out of me too. They’re terrified of me there, Cathy. If you come with me now, there’s nothing any of the sodding Fae can do about it, not any of their people.” He looked at Will. “Not even him.”

Will couldn’t believe a man would dare come into his house and try to take his wife away right in front of him! Was he still in that awful black box, dreaming, having been driven mad by the Sorcerer?

It seemed Cathy didn’t believe him either. At least she wasn’t moving towards him. She was staring at Sam’s hand, frowning.

“You don’t believe me?” he asked. Before she answered, he went to one of the globes held in an ornate light fitting. He reached up towards it and the sprite inside dulled noticeably. When his finger touched the glass the tiny creature cowered away as far as the globe would allow, barely casting any light at all.

“I believe you,” she said. “But I told you, Sam, I’m not going to run away.”

“I know you said that.” His hand dropped to his side. “But it must be because this twat put a spell on you.”

“What did you call me?”

Sam ignored him. “I can break it. Just take my hand and all of their curses, all of the stuff they’ve done to you will be broken. And I’ll keep you safe.”

Cathy sniffed. “I’ve heard that before. How could you do that?”

“They can’t come near me, nor anyone under my protection.”

“So my safety would be dependent on you?” Cathy shook her head. “You want me to come and live in your cage instead?”

“No, it’s not like that!”

Will stared at her. Was that all this life was to her? A cage?

She looked at him then, saw the hurt in his eyes and her face softened. “I’m not going anywhere,” she said. “There’s too much to do.”

“Listen to me,” Sam said. “My wife thought she could change things, and she put herself in danger every day and you know what happened to her.”

“I’m not your wife,” Cathy said gently.

“Don’t you get it?” Sam’s voice was louder. “We can stop all of this! We can get your friends, all of the wives treated like shit, like you are, and we can get them out of the Nether and the Fae won’t be able to do a damn thing about it! You know what they do, how they steal people. If we worked together, we could stop it! The Sorcerers and the Arbiters don’t give a fuck about people but we do!”

“We could stop the Agency,” Cathy whispered.

Will brushed the back of her waist with his hand. “He wants to throw everything into chaos. If the Agency collapsed, hundreds of people would be left without any idea of how to care for themselves. Only a small fraction

of their staff understand Mundanus. Destabilising Society would only encourage the Patroons to be more controlling. This ‘Lord Iron’ can’t be everywhere at once. And what if someone falls out of his favour? Cathy, he’s not offering freedom. He would be in control.”

“I’m offering something better than being owned by some prick from the fucking dark ages who can’t handle the fact his wife might have a male friend.”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, shut up! Both of you!” Cathy held up her hands. “Sit down. Let’s talk like adults. Will, I have no idea why you threatened Sam, but there’s no reason for you to be so antagonistic.”

“He wants you back!”

“Back?” Cathy looked at the ceiling and then groaned. “You thought we were lovers? We’re just friends.”

Sam came further into the room and sat on the other chair in front of the fire. Cathy moved away from him, taking care to make sure there was always something between them, as if she feared he would lunge for her. Will felt his fears ease. They weren’t lovers and she was clearly trying to protect the magic bound in their wedding ring. He sat down too.

“Right, let’s get this straight,” she said to Sam. “I don’t want you to break the magic on me, even though the Iris curse is offensive as hell, because there’s other magic—wish magic—that I want to preserve.”

“Poppy told me about that,” Sam said. “He told me you were going to destroy everything because of the third wish you made.”

“He did? But that’s not what I wished for. My wish was to reach my full potential.”

“Well, he thinks you’re potentially destructive. Oh, fuck!” He slapped his hand over his mouth and looked at Will. “He also said you shouldn’t

know, because if you tell your patron, he'll be able to take what he wants from Cathy instead of your baby."

"I knew he wanted something from our child," Cathy said. "Well, that settles it. We are never having children, Will."

Will frowned at the declaration, disturbed by the thought of losing the chance to be a father. "Let's try not to worry about every single thing at once," he said, but he was quietly panicking. He couldn't let anything happen to any child of his, nor to Cathy. Perhaps he needed to accept the help Sam was offering, as galling as it would be. Perhaps fighting the system as Cathy wanted was the only way to keep his family safe. "Tell me more about this wish business," he said.

"There's no need to worry, you'll both be safe, whatever happens." Cathy grinned at Carter. "You too. The wish was to reach my full potential in such a way that wouldn't 'draw the attention of the Arbiters, nor endanger my life, nor that of the individuals I love and care for—be they Fae, a member of the great families or a mundane'. It's going to be tough, but we'll be all right."

Will knew there was a world of difference between endangering someone's life and simply making their existence miserable. She had a lot more faith in the strength of Poppy's magic—and its interpretation—than he did.

"But," Cathy added, "I would appreciate some help, Sam."

Sam nodded. "I can keep the Fae out for a start, and break any curses put on the staff, that sort of thing. But are you certain you want to stay?" His eyes flicked to Will. "Are you sure he won't stop you doing what you want to do once I've gone?"

Cathy looked at Will and he let her search his face.

“I’m certain,” Cathy said. “Will, you’ll be all right with Sam coming to visit in the future, won’t you?”

Will nodded. It wasn’t the time to complicate things with his doubts and he might need Sam himself. “I’m sorry we got off to a bad start,” he said, mostly for her benefit. “Let’s shake hands whilst I have nothing you can break upon me.”

They stood, shook hands like gentlemen but looked at each other with the hard stare of men who knew nothing had changed at all. Cathy led Sam out, promising to be back soon. Carter followed her and Will was left alone.

Whilst he felt no warmth for the man, having Sam on side could be critical if he was indeed capable of what he claimed. And hearing of Iris planning to take what he wanted—whatever that might be—from his wife or his child made Will’s teeth grind. Why fight to maintain a status quo in which it would be acceptable for either of them to be taken from him? It might not have been the schedule that he would have chosen, but it was clear to him now that there was no way—and now no desire—to find a way back to where they were before.

Morgan brought fresh tea and apologies for taking so long, explaining that he was trying to settle over a hundred people into the household, many of whom had extraordinary needs.

The tea made his lip sting but it was worth it. By the time he was on his second cup, Cathy returned. She looked radiantly happy and then seemed to remember what they were talking about before Sam interrupted.

“So then…what’s it to be, Will? Are you with me?”

Will thought of the first ball of the season, how ungrateful she’d been and how the sight of the bruises on her arms at the Peonias’ soirée had stirred something protective inside him. He recalled the gut-twisting guilt she’d made him feel after they’d married and the countless times she’d

irritated him. He remembered the way she'd glowed in the Londinium salons when debating some point of philosophy and how she'd dealt with Freddy's attentions. He thought of the panic he'd felt when he learned of the attack, and the hours of watching her sleep as she healed, and the smile when he gave her the library. "There's a huge amount to talk about," he said, reaching for her hands. "But there's something I need to tell you first."

Her brow creased and she let him pull her down to sit on the arm of his chair.

"The next few weeks, no, the next few years are going to be hard, Cathy. I don't know if we'll come through this. Lord Iris isn't going to forget what he wants from us." She took a breath but he pressed a finger to her lips. "We'll sort something out, I'm sure. Having a friend like Lord Iron gives me some hope. But before we work out how we make the changes that need to be made, there's something I want you to know."

She looked frightened for the first time since he'd come back.

"I think you are the bravest, strangest, most infuriating, intelligent and fascinating woman I've ever had the privilege to know and…" he paused, uncertain whether to pin a single word to the mess of emotions she stirred in him. "And I love you, Cathy."

She laughed and a fat teardrop rolled down her cheek. "Oh. All right. That's better than I thought it would be." She looked up, nervous.

"What is it?"

"I was just waiting for a piano to fall on my head or something." There was a knock at the door and she jumped to her feet. "Come in."

A woman walked in, pale and red-eyed as if she'd been crying. She was dressed like a maid, her brown hair tied back in a bun, but she didn't curtsy and look away like a maid would.

“Will,” said Cathy, “I want to introduce you to someone. This is Miss Rainer. She was my governess and she’s the bravest person I know. Miss Rainer, this is Will, my husband.”

Will kissed her hand, thinking it best to treat her as royalty, given the way Cathy clearly adored her.

Cathy gestured for Miss Rainer to sit. As she did so, Cathy leaned over and whispered, “I love you too” in his ear. Then, blushing, she tugged at her sleeves nervously and picked up the teapot. “Tea?”

29

Margritte listened to the scratching sound and tried to imagine it was something other than a rat. In the darkness, the sound could only come from claws against stone, and with thoughts of the claws came thoughts of the teeth and the whiskers and she drew her knees up under her chin. She must be imagining it. There weren't any animals in the Nether.

She couldn't stop shivering. The tower room was freezing cold, so much so that she wondered if it had been cursed, and the damp from the stones beneath her was leaching into her bones. It wasn't just the cold though. She was frightened, more so than she'd ever been in her life, even more than the time she and Rupert were nearly killed.

What could have happened to Rupert? He seemed invulnerable. Had Ekstrand finally managed to kill him? Was it yet another disastrous repercussion of her poor judgement? She thought of his awful manners and strange affection for her. She couldn't decide how she felt about his death. She was saddened, but not grief-stricken. She didn't really know him and they were at odds with each other when they parted. The interruption from the gargoyle was a relief at the time. Now Oxenford was in the hands of Nathaniel Iris, she wished Rupert was still alive.

Just the thought of Nathaniel made the shivering worse. After exiling her son—something for which she was grateful—he'd marched her out of the Sheldonian, his fist in her hair, making her stumble as she tried to walk without him ripping it from her scalp. He threw her in a carriage at the end

of Broad Street and climbed in with her, forcing her onto her knees inside as they rode to the end of the city.

He made her watch as one of Lord Iris' faeries made a new road to Oxford Castle, a property outside the boundaries of Oxenford, and then made her walk along it as he held her hands behind her back.

"My ancestor built this," he said as they arrived at the newly reflected castle. "Lord Iris was very disappointed when he learned its anchors had been destroyed. He was delighted to restore them for me. A fitting place for my rule, I feel."

"I find it interesting that your brother was named after the conqueror, rather than you," she'd said. He'd pinned her wrists higher up her back the rest of the way. It had hurt so much but she didn't cry. Neither did she when they reached the castle and he showed her the tower. Even the mundanes had felt the evil of the place; she knew the anchor property had been a prison for hundreds of years.

"You'll rot in here," he said as he threw her in. "Unless," he said through the grill in the door after he'd locked it, "I can find another use for you." He'd looked at her breasts then, and below her waist, as if seeing through the black satin. For a moment, he looked as if he was going to unlock the door again, but someone called his name and he left, taking the only light with him.

The darkness was welcome then, but not any more. I deserve this, she thought. I should have let it go. She remembered Bartholomew teaching Alexander that it was better to rise above a feud than fuel it. Why hadn't she listened to that herself?

"Bartholomew," she whispered, needing to hear his name in the darkness. She tried to remember what her name sounded like when he spoke it but all she could hear was the awful scratching claws.

Then she imagined donning a silver cloak and escaping into the Nether, as Queen Matilda had donned a cloak the colour of snow and escaped across the frozen river almost a thousand years before. She held the image in her mind as she closed her eyes, arms tight around her legs and head on her knees, the silver cloak blurring into the white queen as she drifted towards sleep.

A noise made her stir. She thought the outline burning into the stone was a dream, so she closed her eyes again. When something touched her arm she jolted, banging her head against the stone as she saw a man's silhouette against a bright rectangle of light.

"Margritte, come with me."

"William?" She didn't trust herself. It couldn't be him.

"Yes," he replied, helping her to stand. "Come on."

She let herself be guided through the Way, out of the cell. She found herself in a large bedroom, with a metal bath full of steaming, sweet-smelling water, by a roaring fire. Fresh clothes were on the bed and tea was on a table alongside a box filled with bandages and dressings. She glanced back at the dank cell before the Way closed.

"Welcome to my home," William said, guiding her on unsteady legs to a chair beside a dressing table. "There's a maid ready to help you bathe, but let me see to that cut first."

"I…don't understand." She couldn't stop shaking.

"I told you that I'd do everything I could to put things right," he said, bringing a box over with a small bowl of water. "I wasn't prepared for what Nathaniel did and I couldn't say anything against him there. I didn't want him to take the city like that and do what he did to you, but to speak against him whilst he wore the Patroon's sword would have been treason."

"But isn't rescuing me just that?"

William smiled as he soaked a ball of cotton wool in the water. “Nathaniel would never guess his own brother did it. His arrogance makes him complacent. Besides, I couldn’t trust him to treat you well. It seems I was right. He didn’t…hurt you any more than this, did he?”

She shook her head and winced as he cleaned the wound.

“Your son is at Hampton Court and safe also. He doesn’t know you’re here. Of course, you’ll have to hide until certain arrangements are in place.” William dabbed at the cut with a piece of dry linen. “But you’ll be safe here.”

“Does anyone else know you’ve done this?”

“Cathy, of course. She’s desperate to speak to you once you’ve refreshed yourself. And there are two others who know—they’re waiting with her. But I’m under strict instructions to leave their identities as a surprise.”

“Does she know what I did to you?”

“Yes. Especially the part where you untied me and got me away from the Sorcerer.”

“She was right about you,” Margritte whispered. “You are a good man.”

Something flickered across his face, making him look away and rummage in the box. “Here we are. These aren’t the prettiest accessories, but they’ll keep the wound closed.” He waved a strip of paper with what looked like tiny butterfly shapes glued to it. He peeled one off and placed it gently over the cut, then added a second. “There. You’ll be good as new in a few days.”

“Do you remember that first time we met? Cathy stuck a fork into Freddy and we had to send him home early.”

William nodded. “Yes, I remember that.”

“We sat up late into the night talking about you and Cathy. Bartholomew was so excited. We had plans, you see, and—”

“Please,” his face crumpled. “I don’t want to—”

“He knew the two of you could help us to change Londinium,” Margritte pressed on. “I’ve come to realise, these last few days, that he was a very wise man. He saw the best in people. Had I held more of him closer to my heart in my grief, I wouldn’t have destroyed everything my family had left. What I wanted to say, William, is that I don’t blame you any more. You were used by your Patron and I want something good to come of all this.”

William cleared his throat, looking up at the ceiling rose. “Cathy and I feel the same. We’re making dangerous plans, Margritte. Cathy thinks that you’ll be a great help to her, if you’re willing.”

She smiled. “I am.”

“I’ll fetch the maid,” he said, closing the box and tucking it under his arm. “Once you’re ready, she’ll take you to Cathy. Then we can all rest.”

“Thank you.” She gave a gentle curtsy as he bowed, and watched him leave.

She bathed away the grime of the prison cell and ate for the first time that day. The tea eased a headache that had been steadily worsening. The dress she’d been given was a passable fit in a dark enough green to be acceptable for mourning in the unusual circumstances. A black shawl was given to her, for which she was grateful, and she followed the maid downstairs. The house was full of people; she could hear laughter and crying in rooms she passed and the staff were busy despite the late hour.

“Mrs Margritte Semper-Augustus Tulipa,” the maid announced at the door and she was shown into a beautiful library.

“Margritte, I’m so glad you’re here.” Cathy came to her and gave her a swift, fierce embrace before she could see the other two people sitting by the fire. “I’m sure I don’t need to introduce you…”

She stepped aside as the two women stood. On the left was Charlotte Persificola-Viola and on the right was the one she and Bartholomew had searched for and lost hope of finding.

“Natasha Rainer!” she cried and rushed forwards. “Charlotte!”

The three of them embraced and laughed and wept and then laughed again. Margritte pulled back and extended a hand to Cathy, drawing her into the circle. They stood, arms about each other’s shoulders, taking in the sight of each other.

“In case you were wondering,” Charlotte said. “My husband is still a troll of a man.”

“The curse is gone!” Margritte cheered.

“I can say what I please again, thanks to a rather dashing friend of Cathy’s. But I’ll take more care than I did before.”

“This is all desperately exciting and wonderful,” Natasha said, “but we can’t weep all night. It’s already 3 o’clock in the morning and we don’t have all of the proposed changes for the Court drafted yet.”

“You haven’t changed either,” Margritte said, kissing her on the cheek.

“Before we get to work,” Cathy said, going to the teapot, “a toast. Ladies, I will charge your cups.” When they each had a cup of tea, Cathy held hers high and said “To…”

“Freedom of Speech,” said Charlotte.

“The brave women—and men—who went before us,” said Natasha.

“Absent friends and loved ones,” said Margritte.

“The future,” said Cathy, chinking cups. “And all who sail in her!”

Sam pushed the keycard into the slot and adjusted the package under his arm as the door beeped and clicked open. He switched on the light, put the package to one side and took a brief look down the corridor before closing the door behind him.

The boxes were as he'd left them, along with her letters. He unwrapped the package and propped the photo of him and Leanne laughing in the field against a box, having reclaimed it earlier from the storage facility his house contents had been moved into.

He sat where he had before and read the last five letters Leanne had left him. He looked at the photo of her, letting the memory play out. He thought he would cry, having struggled to hold it in when he got it back in Exilium, but instead he felt calm.

He pulled out a notepad and pen from his rucksack and leaned back. He looked at Leanne's long hair, the way her head was tipped back and how the laughter had seized her totally.

Dear Leanne,

I suppose it's a bit weird, writing to you when you're dead, but seeing as you wrote letters to me that could only be read once you'd died it kind of fits.

I didn't speak very well at your funeral. I was all fucked up and angry and I think I was mostly angry at you. Don't get me wrong, I wanted to tear Neugent a new one, but I felt like I had to speak about someone else in front of all of those people from your work life. I felt like you'd left me behind. I suppose you did, in a way, but not because I wasn't good enough and that makes all the difference to me.

Knowing what you were doing makes all the difference too. When I think about you now I feel proud. I was married to

someone brave who wanted to kick a giant in the ass and that's cool. It beats the hell out of grieving for someone I thought was a shallow corporate sell-out, I can tell you that! Or, I would, if you were here.

You were brave, Lee. And I love you more for that now than I did when we were messing it all up between us. But I can look back at that and think, "She had a lot on her mind" and I can look back at who I was back then and think, "He didn't have a fucking clue" and then it's neither of our faults. See? Much better.

Now I'm crying. It's OK, no one can see me. I'm sitting with all your boxes and, before I go, I'm going to pick one out at random and I'm going to fix the first problem I find inside. I can do that now. I wish you could see it. I don't believe you're watching from a cloud. I think you're just dust now. Do you remember that thing on Facebook I showed you? Probably not, you were stressed out at the time. It was by that Carl Sagan bloke, I think. Something about us all being starstuff. The bits that you were made of are now off doing new things like making tree molecules and rainwater and I don't know. Snow. Hopefully snow. You used to love that.

I love you, Lee. I'm going to try and fix all this shit you worked your ass off to find out. I might take a while, but I will.

Yours,

Sam

Mr Ferran

Lord Iron

Prince Fuckwit

He folded it over and kissed it and laid it on top of her letters. He let himself sit and cry a while. It was supposed to be healthy or something. It mostly felt like shit but when it was over he felt like he'd done something important.

The first file he pulled out of the nearest box detailed the terrible conditions endured by inhabitants of a village in India located on top of a massive coal deposit. Leanne had painstakingly uncovered a series of secret payments from a subsidiary of CoFerrum Inc to incentivise the mining company to use open-cast techniques to up their production. In addition, she'd detailed overheard conversations about encouraging the company to leave underground fires burning in an effort to drive the villagers away.

It wasn't working; the people didn't have the financial means to move and were offered no help to do so. People were suffering from dozens of pollution-related illnesses and the average lifespan was over ten years lower than the national one. At first he couldn't see why Ferran was interested in the place, but then realised the cheap coal was used nearby in iron ore production.

Sam memorised the name of the village, the companies involved and the names mentioned in her report, then slid it back into place. He put his rucksack back on, kissed his fingers and pressed them to her lips in the photo and then left, locking his letter in with her legacy.

30

Cathy didn’t dare sit down. If she did, she’d fall asleep. They’d brainstormed ideas, welcoming Will into the discussion after he’d snatched a couple of hours’ sleep and agreeing on what should be announced at the Court that day. Occasionally she’d had to sit back and take a moment to realise it was actually happening. Miss Rainer was restored, Charlotte was free of the curse her husband had placed upon her, and Margritte and Will were working together. She felt exhausted and elated, excited and terrified all at once.

She looked at the clock. It was five to ten in the morning and Dame Iris would be arriving any moment. “Carter, could you check that Morgan has everything ready for the Dame’s visit?”

He left and she began to pace. When she heard the sound of horses’ hooves she went to the window and saw the Dame’s carriage entering the driveway. Cathy smoothed down her dress, feeling sick. It wasn’t one the Dame had commissioned on her behalf and it was bound to be the first thing she commented on, but being able to breathe easily was worth it.

“Everything is ready, your Grace,” Carter said. “The Dame won’t see anyone or anything out of the ordinary.”

Managing a nervous smile, Cathy peeped from behind the curtain as the carriage stopped and the footman helped the Dame to step down. She still hadn’t decided how she was going to start the conversation. As the clock struck ten the doorbell rang and Cathy fiddled nervously with her gloves as she heard Morgan escorting the Dame down the hallway.

“I won’t let her do anything to you,” Carter whispered.

There was a single knock on the door and Morgan entered. “Dame Iris,” he announced and she entered in her usual haughty manner.

“Dame Iris,” Cathy said and curtsied.

“Good morning, Catherine. I was heartened to receive your invitation, despite the inconvenience of the hour. It’s quite refreshing to be invited rather than—” She stopped and frowned at Cathy’s gown. “Oh, for goodness’ sake, child, I thought we’d progressed past my having to select your outfits for the day. Do you intend to wear that to Court?”

“Yes, I do. Would you like tea?”

The Dame sniffed. “It is the height of laziness to receive a guest for morning tea in the same gown one intends to wear to Court. As you can see, I have taken the trouble to dress appropriately and will have the inconvenience of returning home to change before going to the Tower.” When Cathy didn’t reply, the Dame pursed her lips and said, “Well, inappropriate attire or no, to business.” She reached into her reticule as Cathy watched, realising the Dame was going to drive the conversation whatever she said. She didn’t seem to have noticed that Carter had remained inside the room and was standing by the door. Perhaps she had, and was simply demonstrating how expert she was at ignoring the servants.

“I understand Nathaniel is the Chancellor of Oxenford now.”

“Yes.” Dame Iris smiled as she pulled out a small pair of opera glasses. “He’ll bring that archaic city into line in no time. I trust William is settled?”

“Yes,” Cathy replied. “He’s resting.”

The Dame held the glasses up and looked through them at her. Her lips thinned into a disapproving line. “Still not pregnant, I see. Really Catherine, is it so difficult?” She folded the glasses closed and dropped them back into

the reticule. “Perhaps I should be more sympathetic. After all, it must be a chore for William to have to do his duty with such a plain girl.”

Cathy dug her nails into her palms, taking a breath to speak but the Dame was already fishing something else out of the bag.

“You need to drink this. You’ll fall pregnant the next time he exercises his marital rights. As it’s extraordinarily expensive and rather rare, I wish you to drink it in front of me. Then I can be certain you haven’t failed to do that either.”

“Dame Iris,” Cathy said, taking the small glass bottle from her. “It may come as a surprise to you, but I didn’t invite you here to belittle me.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Yes, I thought you’d find that difficult to understand.” She raised the hand holding the glass bottle and then let it drop from her fingers. It smashed when it hit the edge of the table. “That’s what I think of that.”

For a few seconds the Dame just stared, open-mouthed, at the liquid dripping onto the rug below.

“*If* Will and I do decide to have a child it will be on *our* terms. I’m not going to let you make me feel inadequate any more. You’re nothing but a bully, using your power to make all of the women in the Iris family terrified when you should be doing all you can to protect them from Lord Iris and this shitty Society we’re forced to live in.”

“How dare you!” The tip of Dame Iris’ nose had turned an interesting shade of pink. “You insult me and make it clear you intend to disobey our Patron? I underestimated how irretrievably stupid you are.”

“You did underestimate me, but don’t feel bad—everyone else does. I’m not going to do anything you tell me to any more. I’m not going to thread another sodding embroidery needle. I’m not going to spend another minute

of my life listening to you and your cronies keeping the pecking order with gossip and social cruelty."

"What gives you the right to speak to me like this?"

"Knowledge. I know what you did to get the power you have now."

The Dame's lips closed and she drew herself up to her full height. Her hand was swinging for Cathy's face before she'd even registered the movement, but Carter caught her wrist and turned her hand palm up. A tiny needle was poking from the inside of a gold ring.

"I saw her twist the ring, your Grace," Carter explained as the Dame cried out. "It could be poison or a curse."

"You're well-versed in curses, aren't you?" Cathy said. "You should know that I'm wearing a gift from my husband that will protect me from any Charms that you try to use on me, including the Fool's Charm. My bodyguard is also protected, as you might expect."

"This is unacceptable! Unhand me, you awful man!"

Cathy shook her head at Carter and he kept hold of her wrist. "You cursed the former Dame Iris to always speak the truth. It might seem harmless, but in the Londinium Court nothing could be more destructive."

"What nonsense is this?"

"But you only cursed her after you'd wheedled your way into her husband's affections and all but convinced him that his wife was going mad. It happens, after all. Some people can't cope with life in the Nether. I imagine you said something very like that to him."

"I…I did nothing of the sort."

"You put a thought in his head and then cursed her just before a critical soirée. You played the concerned friend, rushing to find him as the curse forced her to say things we all might think but would never say. You

convinced him she had to be removed, that Lord Iris wouldn't stand for anything but perfection, after all."

She'd given up denying it and had started to look like she might faint. Cathy didn't put it past her to fake that, though, so she pressed on. "You might be wondering how I could know all this."

"I won't ask because it isn't true."

"Eleanor told me herself."

The Dame shuddered and her gasp was so sharp that Carter put his other hand on her shoulder, readying himself to catch her.

"She's still cursed, you see. She still can't help but tell the truth. I offered to lift it from her—yes, I could do that, if I wanted to—but she refused the offer. She's amazing. She said that being known as a truly honest person is remarkably liberating."

"She's dead," the Dame whispered. "You're lying."

"There was someone else you underestimated: your husband. He loved her and he couldn't bring himself to kill her, so he had her taken away to a secret asylum. You'll be finding out a lot more about that very soon—if you choose to come to Court now. You do look rather unwell."

"I will see to it that Lord Iris punishes you himself."

"No, you won't. Because if you do anything like that, or try to curse or Charm me ever again, I'll tell Sir Iris all that I know. And what's more, I'll reunite him with his first wife."

"I refuse to be treated with such disrespect! Call your dog off me! How dare you accuse me of something so preposterous!"

"You still don't believe me?" Cathy nodded. "We thought you'd find it hard after all these years of being queen bee." She went into the hallway and called for Eleanor, who came out of the room next door, her face flushed with excitement.

“Is it time for my dramatic entrance?”

“Yep.”

Carter let Dame Iris turn, but still kept hold of her wrist. Eleanor came to the doorway, dressed in a fine black velvet gown, her white hair arranged in a luxurious loose bun of the Edwardian style.

“Rumours of my death—” Eleanor began but Dame Iris collapsed in a dead faint before she could finish the line. “Well, how irritating. I’ve always wanted to say that.”

Carter laid Dame Iris on the sofa.

“Well, I think she’s convinced now,” Cathy said. “Eleanor, I really do think you should take up my friend’s offer to stay with him. He’ll be able to protect you better than anyone else.”

“That smartly dressed young man everyone’s been talking about? I may well do that. I imagine she’ll be keen to do something despicable to keep me secret. You need to be careful too. You’re making a lot of enemies in a very short period of time.”

Cathy nodded. “I know. Carter, keep an eye on her. I’ll send for her footman and they can take her home. If you’ll excuse me, Eleanor, I need to get ready for the Court.”

From her bedroom window she watched the Dame being carried into the carriage and reviewed the confrontation. She could get used to standing up for herself. But she wasn’t going to gloat; both the Dame and the Agency would be seeking to have her removed now. Even though Sam had promised to protect her if Lord Iris summoned her, she knew it was only a short-term solution.

“How did it go?” Will asked from the doorway.

“Well, I think. She fainted anyway. I’ll take that as a win. Carter was ace.”

Will looked tired, but his injuries had been dealt with by a Charm—either glamoured or healed, she wasn't sure which one. "You look beautiful," he said. "Tackling Dames evidently suits you."

"So do you. Have you heard anything from Nathaniel?"

"No. I imagine he's too embarrassed to admit he's lost his first prisoner."

"He won't be too embarrassed to hunt for her though."

"No, but I've given Margritte a powerful Shadow Charm. She'll be safe until we think of a better long-term solution."

Cathy smiled as he came towards her. "You must have spent a small fortune on Charms in the last twenty-four hours."

"It's no trouble," he said and kissed her tenderly. "So how does it feel to be a force of chaos and destruction?"

She laughed. "Brilliant, actually. Is it time to leave?"

"Yes. Charlotte's already gone ahead. It's quite a team you've put together."

"Do you think we can do this, Will? Do you think we can actually change things?"

"We already have," he said, drawing her into his arms. "I don't know if we'll be able to do everything we want before Lord Iris intervenes or the Patroons mobilise against us, but we'll give it a good try. Are you ready?"

"No." Cathy rested her head against his chest, allowing herself a moment of comfort. "But I don't think I'll ever be."

They rode to the Tower in silence, sitting side by side, her fingers laced between his. She tried to think through what she was going to say and the possible responses and the ways she could handle each one, but it soon unravelled into nebulous fears. She thought of Sophia and whether to talk to

Will about her theory about his uncle but decided it wasn't the right time. And what use would it serve him to know anyway?

She wondered how Josh was and whether he'd found happiness. She remembered when she'd thought she was in love with him, and knew now that it wasn't real. She squeezed Will's hand, felt him squeeze hers back, each comforted by knowing the other was there. He wasn't the man she'd wanted to marry but somehow they were making a life together. Did he really say that he loved her, the night before? Was that possible?

She thought of the third wish and what Poppy had said. What was her true potential? Could anyone really know before they'd fulfilled it? All she knew was that it felt like she was going in the right direction and no one had stopped her yet. She wondered if the magic had made Will so agreeable to her ideas and decided to put that from her mind. There was no way to know and she didn't want to destroy something wonderful with her neurotic doubts. He'd realised they had to move forward now and he was supporting her.

They arrived and went to the private antechamber. She picked a thread off his sleeve and he tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. He gave a nod to the page and the doors were opened onto the Court.

"The Duke and Duchess of Londinium."

They entered and walked past the residents of the city, each bowing and curtsying as they passed. They reached the gilded chairs and sat. Cathy sought out Charlotte in the crowd. She felt better when their eyes met and Charlotte gave her a look of absolute confidence.

"Many of you may have heard rumours that Oxenford has a new Chancellor," Will began. "I can confirm this is true." He paused as a murmur passed through the assembled. "As a new era begins for that city, so does a new era begin for Londinium. You know I'm a man of change.

You know I’m not afraid to make promises and see them through. I’ve made the roads of this city safe and returned cherished jewels to many of you in this room. It’s time to make more changes, some of which have never been seen in Albion. You have my word that these are not embarked upon lightly, nor will they be made without the interests of the people of this city at heart.”

He looked at Cathy and she knew it was time for her to speak. “I know it isn’t customary for the Duchess to address the Court, but, as William said, things are going to change.” She stood as looks of surprise, indignation and doubt were exchanged in the crowd, and waited a moment for them to settle again.

Cathy felt a rush in her chest, a sure knowledge that everything had been building to this moment, this opportunity with boundless repercussions. There was no fear. There was no doubt. Only potential.

Acknowledgments

It’s inevitable that the same names will crop up here, seeing as this is the third in a series, but that doesn't mean those people shouldn't be mentioned again. As before, thanks to Lee Harris and my agent Jennifer Udden for comments and encouragement about the book in its early forms. Thanks, always, to Peter for listening, commenting, checking the manuscript for stupidity and keeping me sane when the Fear was at its most horrible.

The fondest of memories and thankfulness go to Kate for arranging the research trip to Lincoln College in Oxford on top of all the other support and general brilliance she gave me during our friendship. Rest well, darling. I miss you.

Speaking of that trip, I'd like to thank Laura Broadhurst who was kind enough to give us a tour of Lincoln College and answer all sorts of questions that might well have seemed odd at the time!

Thanks to my friends and family for supporting me through the new and…interesting territory of trying to finish a book whilst launching the first in the series.

And my last but not least goes to the fine people who have read the Split Worlds series, blogged about it, tweeted about it, said lovely things on Facebook and contacted me to say how much they've enjoyed it. Thank you, a thousand times, thank you. Knowing that I've made people love, worry about and shout at the characters who have been resident in my head for such a long time has given me the deepest pleasure.

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